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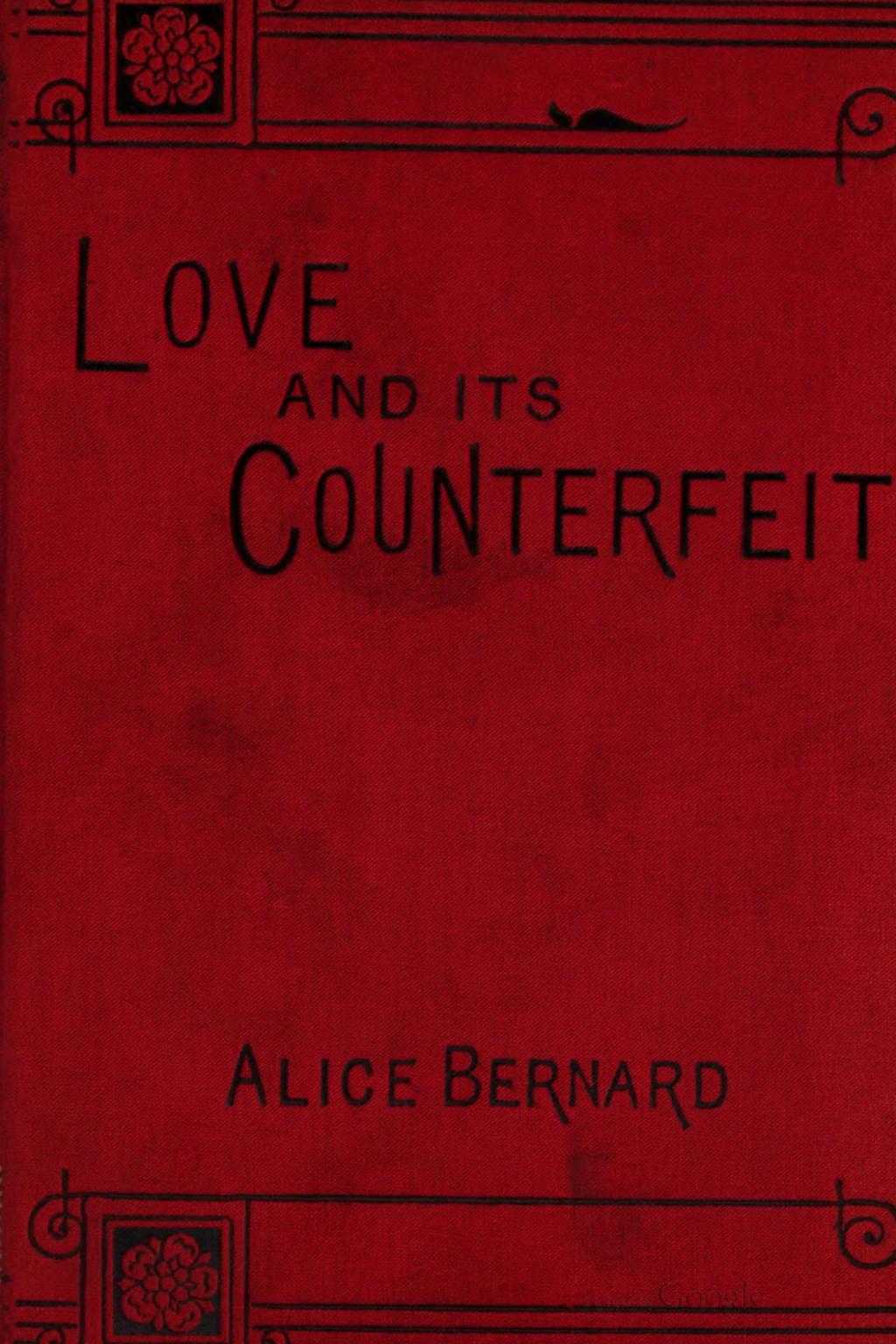
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LOVE
AND ITS
COUNTERFEIT

ALICE BERNARD





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LOVE AND ITS COUNTERFEIT.

A Novel.

BY

ALICE BERNARD.

Hearts are not flint, and flints are rent ;
Hearts are not steel, and steel is bent.

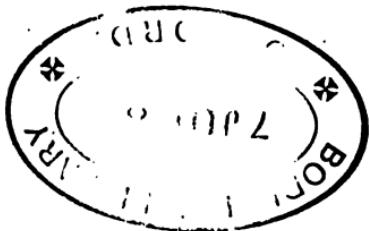
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LOVE AND ITS COUNTERFEIT.

CHAPTER I.

GERARD FEARS.

Sick art thou—a divided will
Still heaping on the fear of ill—
The fear of men, a coward still.

WITH black looks from her mother, and reproachful glances from Mr. Stourton, Florence Liston drives away next day to the station where Gerard has promised to meet her. She knows they consider her conduct foolish in the extreme, and yet some strange, impelling influence is at work, which urges her to proceed, and to it she yields, without even a struggle.

For once in her life this gentle, pliant girl is firm, and disregards all opposition ; she is unmoved and resolute enough to pay no heed to Gerard's sulky tones as he greets her at the station, and pretends not to notice the short, sharp abruptness of his manner.

“ We can only go part of the way in a Pullman's car,” he observes, crossly, as he hands her the tickets ; “ and nice and uncomfortable we'll be for the remainder of the journey ; however, what can one expect when choosing to visit the Antipodes.”

“ The train does not start for ten minutes, so run off and console yourself with a cigar,” answers Florence, brightly, anxious to restore him to good humour.

“ All right,” he assents, a trifle more graciously, and accordingly disappears.

Sauntering up and down, cigar in mouth, Gerard passes a man, whose sturdy build strikes him as being familiar, and who, moreover, he has noticed attentively examining his own portmanteau.

“He’ll be mighty clever if, after reading the address, he is any wiser as to my destination; few people have a notion where such a place lies,” thinks he, contentedly, adding, as he flings away his cigar in disgust, “hang it, there goes the bell.”

Hurrying forward, he knocks against the very person who had attracted his notice, and, turning to apologise, ejaculates :

“Thomas!”

“Yes, sir,” responds the servant, with provoking coolness.

“What the devil are you doing here?” asks Gerard, furiously, a tempest of suspicious anger in his mind, and the aggravating knowledge that he has barely a moment to spare in which to prosecute inquiries.

“Just having a look round about a parcel that has gone a missing,” is the prompt reply. “Did you want anything of me, sir,” concludes Thomas, with an air of solicitous anxiety.

“I wish you would go to—” here wrath

choked further utterance on Gerard's part, for a guard rushes towards him with the words :

“ Now, sir, look sharp, please, the train's going.”

An admonishing shriek from the engine confirms the statement, so there is no help for it ; he has to obey the summons, and be content with Thomas's most unsatisfactory explanation of his reasons for being at that particular station at that particular hour.

“ He came to pry into my affairs ; and Florence's senseless, imbecile behaviour puts me into an abominable fix ; for now I can't keep my eye upon him.” Thus thinking, Gerard gives an impatient twist to the chair into which he has flung himself, and, by this move, turns his back upon Florence and faces the window, out of which he stares with sullen persistency. At that moment he almost hates her for causing him such trouble and inconvenience. His nature is too thoroughly selfish to make the smallest sacrifice welcome, and the fact that

this girl is generally meekly subservient to his every wish only enhances the indignation he at present feels against her for venturing to openly thwart his will.

Several stages of the journey are passed in silence ; then Florence ventures to cross to an opposite seat, and give him a playful tap on the shoulder.

“ Well, what is it ? ” demands her moody lover, without altering his position.

“ Do look round and speak to me a little,” she whispers, beseechingly. “ Otherwise, people will suppose we have quarrelled ; and I see some friends of mamma’s at the top of the saloon.”

These words have the desired effect ; for Gerard prefers the world in general to regard him in the light of an amiable, polite, and remarkably charming man, reserving his fits of morose, bad temper for those at home. With a smile he jumps up, and, insisting that Florence is not comfortable, begins to rearrange the screw of her chair, then places on the table before

her books and papers, and begins to converse with much apparent affection. Too pleased at this change to inquire into its cause, his *fiancée* meets his advances more than half way, and, with recovered spirits, laughs and talks gaily until they arrive at the place where the luxurious Pullman's car must be exchanged for a dingy first-class carriage. Being alone in it, Gerard relapses into his former state of aggrieved meditation; and, noting his lowering brow, Florence hastens to observe, deprecatingly:

“I do hope, Gerard dear, that you will not find things as unpleasant as you expect. I telegraphed yesterday afternoon to Turner about providing some nice place for you to stay at, and you know it will be for a very short time.”

“The bother is all the same, whether I am away from town a day or a month,” retorts he, irritably; “and to discover a ‘nice place’ anywhere in that gloomy, hateful neighbourhood would be impossible.”

"I always thought you rather admired our moorland scenery," answers she, disappointedly.

"What has scenery to say to——but, bah! what's the good of trying to explain when you can't understand what I mean," and Gerard frowns savagely as he stares discontentedly out into the fast-gathering twilight. A host of horrible forgotten memories are thronging through his mind as the train speeds onwards, bearing him every moment nearer the spot he had intended never again to visit.

It was on just such an evening as this that he had travelled along the same route with Viola, and once more her soft, dark eyes seem to gaze mournfully and intently at him, and her sweet musical voice to sound in his ears, full of its old dauntless power, which always awoke such apprehensive fears in his cowardly breast. A feeling as if she were actually present takes possession of him, and he cannot shake it off. He talks to Florence, he walks about the

carriage, but the dread grows, and, with sickening distinctness, he remembers Turner's conversation on the subject of avenging spirits hovering round those by whom they have been wronged, and forcing them to confess their crimes. Can it be true? he asks himself, in horror; can *Viola* really be near?

More than two years of perfect freedom from the haunting nightmare of possible discovery, and then this swift, unaccountable return of the shuddering alarm he first felt after *Viola*'s death, fills him with vague, superstitious terror, and he is ready almost to believe anything.

To his fevered fancy the bleak moorland through which they whirl re-echoes with strange, unearthly sounds, while the engine's wild shrieks startle him as if they were warning cries of danger.

At last the journey is over, and, white and haggard, Gerard steps on to the platform and greets Turner with a sullen nod, then silently assists *Florence* to alight.

“Poor fellow, he is so tired,” whispers she, as she kisses her brother. “Do try and cheer him up a bit.”

Acting upon this suggestion Turner remarks, pleasantly :

“I think we had better get into the carriage at once, as you must both be longing for a little rest, and we can go most of the way together;” then, as he looks towards Gerard, a cloud flits across his frank face, and he adds, “Doctor Carysfort was calling yesterday, and, when he heard that you wished to stay somewhere in the neighbourhood, kindly placed his house at your disposal. I accepted his offer, as I am sure you will be made comfortable there, and besides, it is nearer Moorview than Bander-moor House.”

Gerard gives a shiver at the very name; and yet the idea of visiting Doctor Carysfort is hardly more agreeable. A net-work of circumstances, beyond his power to master, seem dragging him into the society of people whose existence he would fain

forget ; and he enters Turner's carriage with much the sensation of one who finds himself forced into a trap. Indeed, driving through the darkness in moody silence, the thought that perhaps Florence had some motive for her determination to see her brother, strikes him, and he mistrustfully listens to their conversation, and wishes he had never come near the place.

“ I was as happy and jolly as possible in India ; I might have gone back and had no end of fun if I had not been such a fool as to propose to Florence. It was only to spite Mrs. Stourton I did it ; for the girl has precious little to recommend her now that I've found out how deucedly obstinate she can be,” is his mental and unloverly comment. “ If she's suspicious to boot 'pon my word she may find out all about Viola before leaving here, and then will understand that proposal number one was not quite a legitimate affair ; the law of the land not permitting a man to have two wives at the same time ! A row will follow this

discovery, but I expect Mrs. Stourton will take good care to have it salved over; she is the last woman to approve of nonsensical qualms of conscience, or to encourage over scrupulousness about the past when the present is all right. I remember how she took my part when her dolt of a son went palavering away about Viola. I believe to this day she does not give me credit for being married to her; therefore Florence will get small sympathy if she goes back with a lot of Turner's tales."

Having arrived at this correct estimate of Mrs. Stourton's character, Gerard rouses himself, and begins to pay some trifling attention to his betrothed, and, watching how Florence brightens beneath his merest glance, and flushes into glad life at his low-toned words, Turner is half disposed to think that it will be wiser to let things take their course, and not enlighten her as to the real relationship which existed between Gerard Hartington and the beautiful girl he had at the last owned as his wife. It

required a struggle ere he could thus decide to let a shadow rest on Viola's fair fame in his sister's mind, still, when the decision is made, he knows that it is a right one. Mercy to the living must not be forgotten in passionate regard for the dead.

“ My darling, my darling, it would do you no good and only destroy their happiness,” is the cry of his faithful heart. “ I would lay down my life to save your name from dishonour, but I cannot keep for you your husband's love, it has gone to another, and I alone am left to cherish your memory as I have guarded and tended your grave. Darling, darling, even in heaven you must understand this, and know that my love is stronger than death.

Surely the agony of this appeal must reach the gentle spirit to which it is raised. Never in life could Viola have heard unmoved words so despairing yet, so sublime in their unwavering devotion, and now that she is no longer on earth in the body, must the pain be unheeded, unfelt for ?

Ah, no ! By the sweet peace that stole into his aching heart, Turner is sure that his prayer has not fallen to the ground. Viola is more his own now than she could ever have been had she lived, and sinlessly he may worship her, assured that one day they will meet again to part no more.

Could Gerard have seen these thoughts, what astonishment would have filled his mind. The height, the depth, the purity of love like this is to him a closed book, as is also the true, upright honourableness of Turner's nature. Honesty, candour, and the noble trust of an unsuspecting disposition appears to him mere credulous simplicity, which he despises as weak and unmanly.



CHAPTER II.

NEWS OF BANDERMOOR HOUSE.

Suspicion always haunts the guilty mind ;
The thief doth fear each bush an officer.

HE carriage rattling over the loose stones of the village street awakens Turner from his painful reverie ; and when it pulls up at Dr. Carysfort's door, he is ready to spring out with his old bright smile, exclaiming :

“ Here we are, Gerard. I'll run in and see the doctor, while you wish Florence good-night.”

Seizing this opportunity, Gerard bends down and murmurs tenderly in Florence's ear :

“ Forgive me, my pretty one, if I have been cross to you. The truth is, this jour-

ney has put me out. I had lots of important things to do in town, and could ill spare the time to come here, though I did not want to worry you by explaining about them."

"Oh, Gerard, how sorry I am," is the contrite reply. "And how selfish you must think me for never even asking whether you could come conveniently. It did not occur to me that you might have business in London; I have always so looked upon you as an idle man; this must be my excuse, dear," and, at considerable detriment to her hat, Florence lays her small, fair head upon Gerard's shoulder, and, as his arms close round her, forgets all the morose sulkiness he has displayed since leaving town. Kissing her soft, warm lips, he complacently feels that this is a move in the right direction, as she is less likely to listen to disparaging remarks about him when the memory of fond, parting words is lingering sweetly in her mind.

His mood has changed. He is now full

of eagerness to marry Florence, not caring much whether she hears about his former marriage or not, so long as he succeeds in securing her.

“She’s docile enough, after all; better far than most girls; and I’m not going to let Turner stand between us,” he decides, in his perverse, suspicious mind, with which dogged resolution he bids her good-night, and enters the doctor’s house.

“Ah, glad to see you, Mr. Hartington; it is a long time since we last met,” is Dr. Carysfort’s greeting; an extra amount of cordiality thrown into his tone on account of a promise he has just made Turner Liston. “And I am to congratulate you too,” he goes on, hurriedly, noticing the quick, dark frown that gathers on Gerard’s brow at even this faint allusion to the past. “My friend here tells me you are engaged to his sister, and I commend your choice. Miss Florence is one in a thousand. I have known her since she was a baby, and a better, prettier girl never stepped. A good

daughter makes a good wife, they say, and it would be difficult to find a more gentle, attentive daughter than Miss Florence has proved to be, therefore, again, let me congratulate you."

"Thanks," returns Gerard, stiffly; and Turner hastens to put in, laughingly:

"Remember, please, that the object of your encomium is at present disconsolately awaiting me in the carriage, feeling, doubtless, her right ear burning most uncomfortably; consequently your kindest act would be to shorten your song of praise."

"Right, my dear fellow; let me apologize in person for my thoughtlessness," answers the doctor, bustling away, after giving his guest strict injunctions to make himself at home.

"Really, it's not a bad sort of place," comments that gentleman, surveying the cosy sitting room, with its cheerful fire and lamp, and then following the servant into an equally bright-looking apartment, half

study, half bedroom, which had been prepared for his own accommodation.

Before the evening is over, Gerard has likewise come to the conclusion that Dr. Carysfort is "not a bad sort of man." For, while thoroughly disliking and distrusting this unwished-for visitor, the doctor does his best to entertain him, taking the greatest care to steer clear of any mention of the past, and for Florence's sake, treating him with a semblance of deference and respect which he is very far from feeling.

His blunt, truth-loving soul shrinks from associating with a man he secretly believes guilty of—in some mysterious, undiscovered manner—hastening his wife's end ; and yet, without actually telling Turner this suspicion, he could not refuse to take him in.

At first Florence's engagement had distressed him beyond measure, and it was partly at his instigation that her brother had written begging her to break it off. When, however, it became evident that she would do nothing of the kind, he deter-

mined to say no more on the subject, as it only disturbed Turner, without doing the least good. The unexpected appearance of Gerard Hartington might have shaken this decision, had not Turner first obtained his promise to let bygones be bygones, and if possible to keep from referring to the past.

“After all, he may *not* have done anything to his wife,” muses Dr. Carysfort over his evening pipe, trying to think dispassionately of Gerard’s former conduct.

“The poor thing died from the effects of the awful fall she had, there’s no doubt of that. Still—what went before? and why did he look so triumphant, and vindictive, and yet terrified, when he told me about it? And then, too, how he wanted to get out of confessing she was his wife. I wonder what became of the child; what a lovely, high-spirited little fellow he was. Surely the fact that he disliked his father so, is a strong proof against Mr. Hartington. Children generally have a wonderful knack of finding out people’s true characters. No, it’s no use

attempting to school myself into trusting him ; I can't, and there's an end of it."

Coming to this conclusion, the doctor resolutely dismisses Gerard from his mind, and turns his thoughts to pleasanter subjects.

Next morning at breakfast, a letter is handed to Gerard, which he opens with astonishment and reads with disgust. It is from *Martha*, and states that, hearing of his arrival, she is most anxious to see him, and hopes he will call at *Bandermoor House*, as she has things to tell him which he really must know at once.

"What's the matter?" questions his host, observing the angry, uneasy look with which he crushes up the letter in his hand.
"Bad news?"

"No ; a scrawl from that confounded *Martha*, she wants me to call there to-day. Something wrong with the house, I suppose ; it's more bother than enough, always requiring to be repaired, and not a scrap of satisfaction to be had out of the place. I

wish you'd buy it, doctor ; I'd let you have it cheap," he adds, with a laugh.

"I prefer my present house, small though it is," answers Dr. Carysfort. "Besides, I never did care for ghosts."

"Ghosts!" ejaculates Gerard, starting round and staring at the speaker.

"Yes; I expect that's what Martha has to announce. The unfortunate woman declares that lately the most appalling noises resound through the house at night ; and, considering the years she has lived there, uncomplainingly, and the utter scorn she has hitherto felt for what she terms 'goblers,' the conclusion that I arrive at is that a new importation of decidedly objectionable ghosts has taken the place of the quietly respectable ones, which were formerly said to haunt Bandermoor House. Perhaps some more of your relatives have died within the last few weeks, and it is their spirits that pay nocturnal visits to the haunted chamber, and turn out its ancient inoffensive occupants."

Despite his jesting tone, the doctor watches Gerard narrowly while speaking, and marks the alarmed pallor with which he listens, and the forced burst of laughter that follows, as he retorts, scornfully :

“ Haunted chamber, indeed ! there is no such place in Bandermoor House. Evidently poor Martha has lost her few remaining wits if she circulates such a ridiculous report.”

“ My dear sir, that is the sole shred of sense there is in the story,” puts in Doctor Carysfort, seriously. “ The legend attached to the house has been from time immemorial, and the people about here think her an extremely brave woman to live alone in it ; while, as for the room, Turner Liston told me the other day that he had been in it.”

“ And what the deuce was he doing in my house ? ” demands Gerard turning angrily upon the Doctor. “ By Jove, it’s like his cheek to go poking about, meddling with my property.”

“ Mr. Liston is the last man to do that.

He has not visited the place since you were yourself staying there," answers the Doctor, stiffly, giving a cold bow as he rises from the table, and, gathering up his letters, abruptly marches out of the room, feeling his old aversion and distrust returning fourfold.

"I suppose women like insolence, I don't," mutters he, irately, catching sight of the Moorview carriage stopping at his door, while Florence Liston's pretty face appears at the window, looking bright and eager as she inquires for Mr. Hartington, and remembering how exquisitely beautiful had been his first wife.

Thoroughly out of temper, Dr. Carysfort moves off to his study, merely saying a few words to Florence before starting on his morning rounds, and that in a manner that makes her exclaim to Gerard :

"How dreadfully grumpy the Doctor looks; whatever have you done to offend him?"

"Bah! he runs rusty if one ventures to

utter a syllable," is her lover's reply ; and, having gathered from Florence's behaviour that Turner has said nothing to his discredit, he half regrets the sharpness with which he has evidently displeased his host.

Not wishing to mention anything about Bandermoor House to either of the Listons, Gerard finds some difficulty in making up excuses for not accompanying Florence back to Moorview, and finally she drives away with a clouded, puzzled expression in her sweet blue eyes, and a restless, unexplainable sensation of dread weighing down her spirits.

Securing the only vehicle to be had in the whole village—a shabby, disreputable gig, drawn by a gaunt, long-limbed horse, with a hard mouth and strong tendency to bolt—Gerard departs in an opposite direction.

The morning sunlight shines upon moor and fen, revealing alike pools of dark-hued water and long stretches of vivid green, pleasanter to the eye, but far more deceitful for unwary feet. Yet, as he dashes along

the narrow, winding road, Gerard shivers, remembering that headlong ride he took on the evening of Viola's death, and all the horrible fears which assailed him as he sped through the blackness of the wild, autumnal night, with an awful cry of doom ringing in his ears, and chilling his very blood.

“Did *she* give that cry?” was the question he asked himself then; and now, though years have rolled by, he repeats the same words in the same appalled tone. The fall had been so sudden, so swift, that the idea of Viola being able to open her lips strikes him as improbable; still, there remains the loud, unforgotten exclamation to be accounted for, and over it he shudders and wonders while hastening towards Bandermoor House.



CHAPTER III.

A PRESENTIMENT CONFIRMED.

I have syllables of dread;
They can wake the dreamless dead.

ARRIVING at the lodge gates, Gerard has to wait a considerable time.

Mrs. Marks, deafer, if possible, than ever, pays no heed to his furious rings, and the horse, if left to itself, would assuredly return from whence it came.

At length, angry and impatient to a degree that makes him long to smash the gates open and likewise make a raid upon the lodge, Gerard sees her bent form approaching, and when, after much fumbling, she curtseyingly admits him, he gives the horse a blow that sends that enraged animal tearing up the avenue at a rate fearful to contemplate.

“Now, have the goodness to inform me what in the world you want,” says Gerard, sharply, flinging the reins to the gardener, who is working in front of the house, and striding after Martha into the hall. “I give you good wages to look after this place, and have it kept in repair, without bothering me; and yet the moment I set foot in the neighbourhood, you write a confoundedly mysterious letter, and expect me to answer it in person. At great inconvenience to myself I have come, so be quick and tell me what is the matter.”

“I have lit a fire in the little sitting-room, if you’d just step in there,” responds Martha, tremulously, moving forward and throwing open the door, a scared look on her face, and an evident leaning to tears in her voice.

Gerard gives an involuntary start at the sight of that small, well-remembered room, with its faded silken curtains and dainty lace-edged blinds. Everything about it reminds him of Viola. Her tasteful hand had arranged each pretty knick-knack, and

sacredly they were preserved in the same positions she had placed them in, Martha having promised Thomas that no feature in the room should be altered. On a low table by the fire stands her work-basket, with the tiny, half-finished velvet suit she was making for Oscar at the time of her death thrust negligently into it, as if it were left only for a minute ; as if, ere long, the nimble, white fingers would resume their interrupted task, and complete the fashioning of that garment.

Gerard's roving eyes wander shrinkingly round, and take in these details. Then, drawn as by a magnet, settle upon the sofa, where, proud and still, he had seen Viola lying in her last, long sleep. Again he seems to be gazing in fascinated dread at the motionless form, exquisite in shape, yet breathless as marbled statue, and reading strange signs of victory in the calm, pale, smiling face of his murdered wife.

Smitten with a sudden feeling of terror, he turns and motions Martha to follow him

into the dark dining-room, preferring any sort of discomfort to the unbearable memories awakened in his breast by a visit to Viola's favourite apartment.

Walking to the window, he pushes aside the heavy curtains, and, standing in the flood of sunlight thus admitted, in smothered tones urges Martha to proceed with whatever she wishes to state. Accordingly, after much circumlocution and many allusions to her total disbelief in supernatural beings, she declares that Bandermoore House has lately become simply uninhabitable, owing to the noises which go on at night, and resemble people stamping about in the walls.

“Lor', sir, it's just awful,” she asserts, tearfully; “I never got a wink of sleep one whole week. Then it stopped, and I began hoping there'd be no more, when, two days ago, the sounds began worse than ever, and, indeed, sir, I can't stand it much longer.”

“If you don't believe in ghosts, what

makes you so alarmed?" demands Gerard, roughly, glancing with contempt at her frightened face.

"I wouldn't demean myself with such ridiculous fancies," she responds, offendedly. "The folk about here think there is such things, but I've been brought up better, and never had no belief in them sort of notions."

"Then what *do* you imagine causes these remarkable noises that distress you at night?" is the next very natural question.

Martha fidgets with her apron-strings, and looks puzzled.

"You haven't got anything valuable put away in the secret chamber, I suppose," she observes, at length, hesitatingly. "Because it might be people trying to get at that."

"My good woman, where have you picked up this absurd idea of a secret chamber?" asks Gerard, with the wearied air of one about to attempt to enlighten a stupid and blindly obstinate person upon

some subject which really possesses but a single interpretation.

“The room is built in the thick wall facing the staircase,” replies Martha, not quite understanding the drift of his inquiry. “There’s a secret staircase, they say, goes all round through the house and leads out into the garden someway, though I don’t rightly know how, and it’s up and down that the tramping seems to go.”

“Pure imagination,” affirms Gerard, impatiently, adding, suddenly, “Just show me the spot where this mythical chamber is supposed to exist.”

Martha silently complies with his request, aggrieved at the mocking tones in which he speaks.

As they cross the echoing crypt-like hall, and step over the very flags upon which Thomas had knelt and solemnly vowed to avenge Viola’s death, Gerard shivers as if with cold. Every forgotten detail, he had hoped never more to be haunted by, flashes once again through his mind

as his feet touch the steep, carpetless stairs.

“Here’s the place, sir,” ejaculates Martha, interrupting this flow of unwelcome thought. “The wall’s quite hollow here; besides, I remember seeing one of the panels half open; only, it being the day after our dear lady died, I was that unhappy I didn’t even care to look in, and afterwards found it shut up tight again.”

Listening to these seemingly innocent words, a look of magnetized horror slowly gathers in Gerard’s eyes, for with them comes an awful appalling conviction that makes his coward spirit quail, and his heart contract as if an icy hand lay pressing down its heavy, fear-laden throbs.

Yes, he knows now that his uneasy uncertainty as to the origin of the cry he heard, as Viola was hurled to her doom, was no feverish creation of his brain, but the result of an idea scarcely tangible, yet, nevertheless, deeply rooted in his mind from that day until this—the idea being that the

cry came from *behind* him, and not from Viola as she fell.

Knowing of no place from whence such a sound could proceed, he has all along been trying to reason himself out of this thought, and congratulatively supposing that his treacherous action was witnessed by none.

After nearly three years have elapsed, comes the revelation that, unguessed at by him, there exists a small secret room exactly facing the scene of his wife's death, and, furthermore, that its door stood partly open next day, and then was securely re-fastened.

Someone had been there and seen all.

The shock of this conclusion stuns Gerard, and he feels dull and stupid, as if turning to stone.

“It cannot have been Thomas,” he thinks, in troubled perplexity. “Such damning evidence would never have been passed over by him at the inquest. Evidently, he knew nothing definite; or, without a doubt, I'd soon have heard of it. The man has always

hated me like poison. Besides, by his own showing, he was downstairs when the affair happened. Who, then, could it have been? Sivana? Impossible! She'd have made the whole place ring with the news, not to mention making an awful row when questioned about the fall; still, there were no others in the house at the time."

Gerard pauses to reflect deeply upon this last bewildering thought, and vacantly stares at Martha, who, in blissful ignorance of his inattention, holds forth volubly as she taps the wall with energetic hands, and, sanctioned by her master's presence, tries to discover by what means the oaken panels may be moved aside.

"I expect it opens easy enough from the other side," comments she at last, ceasing these fruitless attempts, and wiping her heated brow. "Anyway, the private staircase is nice and convenient for those that know about it, and don't want to go down this one."

"Ah, yes, to be sure," assents Gerard,

coming out of his reverie in time to take in the end of her speech. "Martha," he adds, abruptly, "do you ever remember seeing Mr. Liston looking into that room?"

"No, indeed, sir, he couldn't have, because, except just that once I told you of, there's been never so much as a chink to look through, no more than there is at other parts of the wall. And it's not likely he'd have even heard tell of the place, let alone wish to see it," finishes up Martha, with an expression of supreme wisdom, which has its effect upon Gerard's unsettled mind, and causes him to relinquish a half-formed idea that Turner Liston had been the witness of his wife's death. Having dismissed this improbable notion, he brightens visibly under the cheering conviction that as neither Thomas, Sivana, Turner, nor Martha know about his crime, it was most likely marked by some stranger's eye.

"Perhaps a fellow passing a day or two in the neighbourhood was idling round the

house, and saw the entrance to this staircase, wherever it may happen to be ; thought he'd explore a bit, found himself in a room, and, opening the door, beheld a lady falling head foremost down-stairs ; naturally called out, then felt ashamed of behaving so freely in another person's house, consequently ran off, and forgot all about the affair in a week ; ten to one did not catch sight of me. By Jove, I've been behaving like a fool, making a mountain of a molehill, and getting into no end of a stew about nothing."

This opinion restores Gerard to his normal condition of dogged insolence. As if by magic, his alarmed fears vanish, and, with a scornful smile, he turns to Martha, observing :

“ Well, the question still remains unanswered as to what causes you such violent discomfort at night. For my part, I believe it to be entirely fancy.”

“ Just come and sleep here to-night, and then you'll hear for yourself,” interpolates

she, energetically ; but, regardless of this interruption, he goes on, calmly :

“ If you are really afraid, you had much better leave my service. It will put me to next to no inconvenience, Mrs. Marks being quite able to look after the house.”

Martha fairly gasps at so utterly unexpected an announcement, not having for a moment supposed that he would thus summarily dismiss her.

“ Come, be quick and decide whether you will go or stay,” he urges, impatiently ; and looking into his handsome, relentless face, she knows that this will be the last chance he will ever give her of choosing one way or the other ; that years of faithful service count for nothing ; her possible fate being a matter of perfect indifference to him.

To be sent adrift into the world is at no time pleasant ; but when one is old and grey-headed, the forlorn feeling deepens to positive pain ; for with age comes a dread of change, a shrinking from what is new and untried.

“I’ll stay,” says Martha, plaintively, after a rapid review of her friendless position. “Only, sir, you might let Mrs. Marks live up here, it would be less lonesome like,” she adds, choking back the tears that she guesses would call forth little sympathy from Gerard.

“All right,” responds he, carelessly, hastening down stairs, with the relieved air of a man who has thrown off some heavy burden. “I can speak to Mrs. Marks about it on my way out. Good morning; remember don’t bother me again upon this nonsensical subject.”

“I gave the old woman a fright, and now she’ll stick to the house like grim death,” is his complacent thought while sauntering round the place which the gardener’s feeble efforts have not succeeded in keeping in even tolerable order.

CHAPTER IV.

DR. CARYSFORT SEEKS FOR INFORMATION.

Opinion's but a fool, that makes us scan
The outward habit by the inward man.

HE comforting thought that he has arranged matters most satisfactorily, and has at the same time dispelled from his mind sundry unpleasant fancies and ominous forebodings, makes Gerard drive away from Bandermoor House in a decidedly good humour with the world in general. Remembering Florence's disappointed face on finding that he could not return with her to Moorview, he sets off in that direction without further delay; and behaves in so charmingly an affectionate manner for the remainder of the day, that Turner Liston feels thankful he has refrained from opening

his sister's eyes to the past deceit practised against her.

“ His conduct was disgraceful. Still that's all over, and, as he seems fonder of her than ever, I don't doubt he'll make a very good husband,” is Turner's mental decision.

Dr. Carysfort who joins them at dinner, is far from this opinion, but wisely holds his peace, listening, in grim silence, to Gerard's fluent tongue as it glibly discourses upon every subject mooted.

Florence is enraptured. Never before has her lover shown to greater advantage; she only wishes Signor Morelli were present to hear and appreciate his conversation.

“ They would get on so well together,” she thinks, innocently, nor dreams that the gifted Italian, with his bold, reckless daring and dashing audacity, which shrinks at nothing, and knows not fear, would simply despise this meaner spirited, though equally unprincipled, man, whose actions are tempered by an overweening dread of discovery, and whose ends are compassed by

means of deliberately wrought out plans, full of crafty cunning and cruel, cold-blooded slyness.

Whatever Signor Morelli may be, he certainly is not a coward, and would scorn to bestow even a passing thought upon possible results while pursuing any desired object. Had he been placed in Gerard Hartington's position, with regard to Viola, very probably he would have also made away with her; but then, the deed done, there would have been no trembling alarms, no terror stricken feelings. With an unflinching heart he would have calmly contemplated every remote contingency, and, finding himself free from suspicion, have gone on his way rejoicing, utterly careless as to the future.

Doubtless this is a proof of considerable searedness of conscience; and yet the wild, devil-may-care scamp, who puts a bold face on whatever he does and plays a desperate game beneath, as it were, the very eye of the law, is surely preferable to one who sins to the same extent only in a sneaking, under-

hand manner, and afterwards displays abject sorrow for the *consequences* of his crime, not for the crime itself.

If both were convicted, the former would accept his punishment with a certain resolute pluckiness, an easy, almost jaunty nonchalance ; lawless and guilty, he still is man enough to wish to " die game."

The latter, on the contrary, cowers and quakes, confesses and pleads for mercy, whitens his own character, puts all the blame on someone else, and finally makes those around imagine that in the heat of passion he has committed an act for which he is now deeply penitent. " Extenuating circumstances " are urged in favour of this repentant sinner, and possibly he succeeds in obtaining a reprieve which, assuredly, he does not deserve one quarter as much as the other, who is termed perfectly hardened in crime, and receives not the faintest amount of sympathy.

In nine cases out of ten the blackest deeds are perpetrated by these would-be

penitents, who mask themselves in deceit and guile, and not by men whose headlong daring makes them appear more desperate and more dangerous characters.

The shrewd doctor thinks over this, while watching Gerard and marking the graceful polish of his manner, so different from the rough brusqueness displayed that morning. He reads hypocrisy in his bland, smiling tones, and looks regretfully at Florence, whose flushed cheeks and shining eyes proclaim her complete satisfaction in everything connected with her lover.

“Dr. Carysfort, I want you to persuade Turner to attend our wedding,” she cries, suddenly, drawing him into the conversation. “He is such a lazy fellow, I really believe it is the journey he is afraid of, and, considering that Gerard and I came down on purpose to take him back to London, I think he might stretch a point and come, don’t you?”

This question, asked in the most earnest of tones, somewhat embarrasses the truth-

loving doctor, who shrinks from hurting the girl's feelings, and yet understands Turner well enough to know that the idea of assisting at his sister's marriage is peculiarly distasteful to him. Before a reply can be framed, Gerard comes to the rescue, observing, gaily:

“I say, Florence, you never mean to confess that your powers of fascination are no stronger than Doctor Carysfort's, or that your brother is proof against them !”

“Candidly I do,” she retorts, laughingly, then follow a few low toned-words, which bring soft, swift blushes to her cheeks, and the conversation drifts into other channels, Gerard having reasons of his own for wishing to change the subject.

During their homeward drive the doctor finds his thoughts continually running upon the last time they thus drove together in his cosy brougham. Now, as then, a strange antipathy makes friendly intercourse impossible, and, despite Gerard's

brilliant sallies, he can only, with the greatest difficulty, keep from sinking into moody silence.

Presently he gives utterance to a polite hope that all was found right at Bander-moor House, and, when Gerard cheerfully asserted that "Martha made a row about nothing, thinking to thus ensure additional wages," he ventures upon an inquiry which has been hovering on his tongue ever since the morning. "By the bye, how is that fine little boy of yours getting on?" he asks with apparent carelessness. "A child of his sharpness and intelligence must be quite a companion by this time. I never saw a more manly little fellow."

The carriage lamps throw but a dim light into its interior, yet Dr. Carysfort is perfectly aware that Gerard changes colour and gives a stealthy, uneasy glance at him, ere replying, shortly :

"I suppose he's well enough."

"Then you have not seen him lately?" pursues the doctor, determined to extract

some information out of his reluctant companion.

“Not likely; the boy is in Italy, with his mother’s friends,” retorts Gerard, sharply, thinking this information will put a stop to further remarks.

“Was the report true, that on the night of her funeral his nurse disappeared with him?” is the next demand, which shows that there is no eluding the unpleasant subject.

“Yes,” he sullenly explains; “the woman was devoted to her charge, and foolishly imagined I intended to separate them, so, to prevent such a contingency, ran off with him to Italy. Highly romantic, was it not?” he adds, sneeringly.

“I can hardly wonder at any amount of affection shown towards a child of his sweet, lovable disposition,” responds the doctor, a softened expression crossing his face, as he calls to mind the brave, bright boy, whose wonderful dark eyes and gracious winning ways have made a deep, lasting impression upon him.

Gerard gives an impatient shrug, and plays restlessly with his moustache; the complacent, ingratiating urbanity of his manner has given place to an irritable testiness, which a word may cause to develope into open anger. Having never attempted to govern his temper, it now often breaks out before people he desires to conciliate, as on the present occasion. Being wealthy and sought after, he generally finds it easy to obtain their forgiveness, but Dr. Carysfort is, unfortunately, of a different stamp to the ordinary run of mankind, and has not the least respect for either riches or position. Distrusting Gerard from the first, his sudden lapses from bland amiability to sulky savageness does not much surprise the doctor, though it shows him clearly how perfectly correct was the surmise that his manner at Moorview was merely put on for effect.

“Is it true about the child?” he muses, doubtfully, and infinite compassion filling his

heart at the thought that little Oscar may be entirely at the mercy of his cruel and unscrupulous father, and not with his mother's relations at all. "The story sounds plausible enough, stil—"

An ominous pause concludes the sentence, and, as Dr. Carysfort alights at his own door, his eyes rest on Gerard with a look of searching inquiry, as if he would fain read the secret purposes fostered within his guileful breast. Meeting that earnest gaze, and perhaps dreading further questioning, the young man turns abruptly away, with the careless announcement:

"I am going for a stroll, don't trouble to wait up for me, as I can easily see to the door on my return."

"The door might remain unlocked all night, for the matter of that; burglaries are unheard of in this part of the world," answers the doctor. "If you don't come back before I turn in, remember you will find wine and things awaiting you in the dining-room, and please do justice to them."

“No need to tell me that; your cellar contains the best of everything, and might tempt a teetotaler,” responds Gerard, appreciatively, bestowing a gracious nod upon his hospitable host ere sauntering down the dark street. Occasionally a wave of light flashes across his path from the windows of one of the cottages scattered irregularly about, while here and there a modest lamp flickers dimly before some shop, and throws sickly rays on its heterogeneous collection of saleable articles.

Glancing from side to side in sheer amazement at the primitive state of affairs in this benighted place, and full of astonishment at Dr. Carysfort’s choice of an abode, Gerard passes the last straggling tenement, and walks thoughtfully along, unconsciously taking the most direct road towards Bandermoor House. A few stars bespangle the sky, and cast faint reflections over the wide sweep of country lying beneath. A wonderful calm stillness reigns around; even Gerard’s footsteps on the

soft turf are distinctly audible; it is a night when sound carries to an extraordinary extent.

Having wandered forth, more to escape a *tête-à-tête* with the doctor than to admire the beauties of sleeping nature, Gerard scarcely heeds this solemn hush, until it is suddenly broken by a rippling laugh, perfectly clear, though evidently coming from a great distance off. Then follows a burst of song.

The liquid sweetness of the rich, true notes float on the air, and pausing, he listens surprised, incredulous. The voice advances, now he recognises the words. It is a passionate Italian love song which is thus gloriously sung, with all the fervour, all the soul, which Italians themselves seem alone able to impart to their heart-stirring melodies.

Sadness, grief, despair, hope, love, joy, each feeling rings through the magnificent voice, whose subtle changes are marvellous, and Gerard, without the smallest sympathy

for those who delight in music, for once enters into the spirit of a song he has often heard, yet never before thoroughly understood.

Abruptly as they began, the strains cease, and, half inclined to imagine he has been dreaming, Gerard resumes his idle saunter.



CHAPTER V.

MYSTERY.

*"Tis a truth well known to most,
That whatsoever thing is lost ;
We seek it, ere it come to light,
In every cranny but the right.*

BOUT a quarter of a mile further on three roads cross, and a tall, dilapidated sign post proclaims their respective destinations. Beneath this shadowy spectre is placed a rustic seat, on which the tired pedestrian may rest while deciding his best and shortest route. To-night it is shrouded in gloom, and, approaching from the other side, Gerard might possibly have remained in ignorance of its existence had not he been startled into attention by the sound of a voice apparently proceeding from the very signboard he is about to examine.

“Come, my boy, we must not waste any more time here,” it says, in decidedly human tones, “I ought not to keep you out in the cold like this. Wait, I’ll just see what o’clock it is.”

Here a match is struck, and, leaning eagerly forward, Gerard catches sight of a handsome, dark face bending over a watch, which two shining black eyes are striving to decipher. Some small object is also on the seat, but the feeble light illuminates nothing save the olive-complexioned man, with his mournful, yet intense expression, as if sorrow and resolute determination constantly struggled for supremacy in his heart.

“Nearly eleven! how cruelly I am behaving. Poor boy, you’re dead tired, so must consent to be carried home.”

Thrown on the ground, the fickle light goes out, and Gerard can observe no more, except that the speaker lifts something into his arms, and then moves rapidly away. A large upright form, showing darkly against the dusky hues of evening.

“ Who in the world can that be ? ” muses the bewildered spectator, slowly turning and beginning to retrace his steps towards the village ; “ strange, I seem to have seen him before, though, for the life of me, I can’t remember where. Must be a queer sort of fellow to talk like that to his dog, I suppose it *was* a dog he had with him ! At any rate, there’s no doubt about his singing, it was from this direction the sound came, and he certainly has an awfully good voice. It’s very odd, but that too seems familiar ! ”

Considerably puzzled, Gerard vainly strives to discover under what circumstances he met the stranger, whose face he perfectly recognises. Lurking in his mind is a vague, undefined idea that the meeting had not been altogether an agreeable one ; and yet he cannot recall a single word to justify such a suspicion. Indeed he feels almost certain that they never spoke to each other at all.

Rendered uncomfortable by a confusing

sense of failure in attempting to solve this mystery, he stumbles on through the now dark and silent village, and gives a relieved sigh upon reaching the doctor's house.

A cheerful blaze of light greets him from the dining-room, and, entering he draws a chair to the fire, and refreshes himself by partaking of liberal libations from the various decanters left out by his host.

Between two and three in the morning he seeks his room, a pleasant glow pervading his whole frame, and a hazy forgetfulness of recent discomfiting ideas being the only signs that mark how freely he has shown his appreciation of Dr. Carysfort's generous wines.

Though thus dispelled, the memory of the dark-skinned stranger returns to Gerard's mind next day, and causes him to seek an opportunity to interrogate his host as to any visitors that may be staying in or near the village.

The answer is most unsatisfactory, as, with a look of unmitigated astonishment at the

mere thought, the doctor declares that no one ever comes there unless to visit himself, while Moorview and Bandermoor House are the only places in the least near.

“Where can the fellow have sprung from? What a hatefully mysterious neighbourhood this seems to be!” thinks Gerard, fretfully, while laughing off an inquiry as to whether he met an interesting incognito when rambling about the night before; “I must really speak pretty sharply to Florence unless she consents to return to London at once.”

This accordingly he does, and, finding that she wishes to make out a week with her brother, furthermore writes to Mrs. Stourton beseeching the dignified lady to use her influence, and persuade Florence to abandon so absurd a notion.

This appeal gratifies Mrs. Stourton, and at the same time puts her on her mettle. Consequently a letter, six pages long, speeds its way to Moorview, full of motherly reproof, warning, admonition, with a strong

undercurrent of cutting contempt and withering scorn. The last sentence is plain, and to the point.

“You moved heaven and earth to get Mr. Hartington,” declares the candid writer, “And when, by sheer obstinacy, you succeeded, then apparently you set about trying how most to annoy the poor man. First you insisted on a ridiculously long engagement, for no rhyme or reason, and next, still further, taxed his patience and temper by erratic displays of sudden affection for Turner, knowing all the time that for the last few years they have shown little desire to meet, and that Mr. Hartington has a peculiar objection to the place you determine to visit. With a kind forbearingness, truly remarkable, he has submitted to your caprice, and leaving the comforts of civilized society, consents to remain in the small poky house of a brusque, officious, country doctor, merely to gratify a foolish, purposeless whim of yours. I suppose you imagine this a great sign of power; but let

me warn you, Florence, there is such a thing as going too far, and I do not hesitate to say, that unless you hasten to release him from the irksome position in which he is at present placed, the result may be an end to your engagement. Up to a certain point, men allow themselves to be tyrannized over, but one step beyond settles the business. Mark my words, if you don't come back *at once* to town, there may be no wedding next week. Mr. Hartington is just the style to wait in that odious little village for perhaps two days, and then in utter disgust march off elsewhere, and trouble you no more ; and I should not blame him a bit if he did ; for your conduct from first to last has been childish, heartless, and senseless."

Florence drops the letter with a gesture of dismay, and tears cloud her pretty blue eyes as she looks wistfully across at Turner, who is seated opposite her at the breakfast-table.

"What is it, dear ?" he asks, tenderly, in

answer to that pathetic glance. "Has the mother been administering a scolding on note paper? Why, what a silly girl you are to mind, when in a few days you will be your own mistress, with only Gerard's possible anger to fear."

Florence flushes painfully beneath the memory of Mrs. Stourton's doubts as to whether matters will ever reach this happy termination, and a quick, appalling dread makes her respond hastily, and in unusually decided tones:

"I am so sorry, Turner, this must be my last day at Moorview. Mamma thinks it quite necessary for me to go back to-morrow morning."

"I expect mamma thought it quite unnecessary for you to come at all," replies her brother, smiling, as rising, he moves round the table, and, laying a caressing hand on her fair head, turns the rosy, troubled face to the light, adding gently: "something is the matter, can I help you, dear child?"

“No, it is nothing worth mentioning, I ought not to mind what mamma says—only—yes, I will leave to-morrow,” she concludes with decision, as if answering her own thoughts.

Turner refrains from further questioning, knowing Mrs. Stourton’s proclivities for various descriptions of sneeringly delivered home-thrusts, generally undeserved, but nevertheless vastly disagreeable to the recipients.

“Three days instead of a week! Ah, Florence, you have tired of my company very soon,” he remarks, rather sadly.

“I would gladly stay, as you are perfectly well aware, you naughty fellow,” she retorts, with tearful playfulness. “Do, like a dear good brother, promise to accompany us to London; the change would do you no harm, and I should be so delighted to have your support; Mr. Stourton is the best of step-fathers, still even he cannot make up for your absence.”

“Don’t let us begin discussing this vexed

question again," puts in Turner, hurriedly, an expression of pain giving force to his words. "I told you before that it is not possible for me to assist at your wedding, and I repeat it now."

"But why?" persists Florence, eagerly, "you have never given me any reason, not since confessing that Gerard quite contents you as a future brother-in-law, and you made a mistake in disapproving of our engagement. Really, after all, you resemble mamma, for she behaved in just the same manner, insisting that she would never allow me to marry Gerard, and ending in being perfectly satisfied about it. I cannot understand either of you," she concludes, a shade of annoyance in her voice. "His wealth and position ought to have charmed mamma, and yet, for a mere trifle, she turned against him; while, having been your earliest friend and companion, one might have supposed you would have been pleased instead of likewise showing disapprobation for apparently no reason at all."

“My dear, perhaps changeableness runs in the family,” suggests her brother, wishing to laugh off the seriousness of her manner. “If so, depend upon it, you will not escape, but, on the contrary, will turn out a veritable weather-cock, worse far than your estimable mother, whose mind certainly leans towards change.”

“Nonsense, I am not going to joke upon the subject,” retorts Florence, pouting. “It is very unkind of you not to plainly state why you won’t come to town, and I feel very hurt about it.”

Turner is silent for several minutes; he sees that she is puzzled and disturbed, and longs to remove doubts raised by his own conduct. Presently, with a great sorrow overshadowing his face, he draws her towards him, and in grave, shaken tones, says:

“Child, there are some things men cannot talk about; some griefs that are better hidden for ever from the sight, even of one’s nearest and dearest. It is such a grief that

you ask me to disclose to you this morning, when you desire an explanation as to my reason for not attending Gerard Hartington's marriage. With you it will be sacred, and may settle the uncertainty you feel with regard to my motive, so, listen. More than three years ago I met the lady who used to live in Bandermoor House, and from that hour to this she has been the guiding star of my life, and will be until I die. How, then, could I be present at the wedding of her—" Turner pauses abruptly, with the word husband on his tongue, then adds, "of the man who wronged her."

"I do not see that Gerard was to blame," begins Florence, sharply, but a glance at her brother checks further speech ; his agonized look tells the depth of woe awakened by his confession, and, remembering what she has herself gone through since loving Gerard, the girl twines soft, tender arms about his neck, and expresses her sympathy by kisses full of compassionate

affection, better balm than words, however well chosen.

For the first time since Gerard Hartington came between them, brother and sister are thoroughly reunited.



CHAPTER VI.

A VISITOR.

They that fix
Affection's perfect trust on aught of earth,
Have many a dream to start from!

GERARD'S satisfaction is unbounded when he arrives at Moorview and learns that his *fiancée* has determined to return to London next day; and he mentally decides that Mrs. Stourton is a remarkably clever woman to have accomplished by letter what he failed to obtain by word of mouth. Florence appears quiet and subdued, which her lover puts down as a sure sign that, though ostensibly her own wish, this move is far from being agreeable to her; and he wonders exceedingly what argument Mrs. Stourton employed to bring about so happy a result.

After dinner Gerard expresses himself as most anxious to acquaint Dr. Carysfort with this change of programme, and Turner at once proposes to drive him to the village where he has some inquiries to make regarding the morning trains.

Accordingly the carriage is ordered round, and, while it is getting ready, Florence strolls into the conservatory with her lover.

He is in his very softest, tenderest mood ; full of pleasure at the prospect of getting back to town, and plainly showing how satisfied he is. Listening to him, Florence smiles at the fears her mother's letter had awakened, and proudly thinks that nothing can now come between them.

“ Nine little days, and then our wedding,” he is saying, triumphantly, as they slowly pace between tall feathery ferns, which make the place a very sheltered retreat, and yet render it dangerous to pursue private conversation there, unless in the lowest of tones, as eavesdroppers, themselves concealed, could hear every word uttered.

“Are you not glad, my pretty one,” he questions, raising her drooping head with an air of proprietorship, and amusedly watching the hot blushes dyeing her cheeks.

“Yes, and no,” she falters, shyly.

“And why no?” is his quick inquiry. “Do you think I shall prove an awful tyrant, darling?”

“I am not afraid of that, but I wish it was all over, and we were quietly settled in Italy, say at dear, delightful Venice,” rejoins Florence. “Don’t you agree that that would be charming?”

“Your company would be. As for ‘dear, delightful Venice,’ I hope never to behold it again,” and Gerard’s face darkens as he speaks. Turner’s voice breaks in upon their conversation, calling out, deprecatingly :

“The carriage has been waiting ten minutes, so I thought I’d better tell you,” and, laughing at her lover’s dismayed glance at his watch, Florence leads the way back to the drawing-room.

A hurried embrace, indulged in while Turner gives some instructions to the coachman, and then she stands alone, half inclined to regret not having accompanied them, and conscious of a low, depressed feeling, resulting from Gerard's departure.

“I shall see him again early to-morrow morning, therefore ought not to mind,” she observes to herself, reassuringly, disturbed by this sensation of desponding interest. “Dear Gerard, how good he is, although rather irritable at times,” adds the affectionate girl, with fond inconsistency.

A deep reverie follows on the subject of what she privately terms “Turner’s infatuation.” Since promising Gerard to forgive and forget the past, her ideas with regard to men’s pursuits and pastimes have considerably enlarged, and she can now tranquilly overlook evils she before hardly believed to exist.

With the unfortunate tendency women have when in love, Florence has long ere this ceased to blame Gerard; having

instead placed the whole burden of wrong upon Viola, whom she considers led him astray. Turner's confession confirms and strengthens her belief in the dangerous fascinations possessed by this beautiful rival, and she rather wistfully wonders what has become of one whose attractiveness not only caught Gerard's fancy, but also gained the truer, warmer, regard of her loyal, high-minded brother.

Rendered uncomfortable by these meditations, Florence looks round in search of some employment, then remembers that Turner asked her to rearrange the photographs in his album. Wheeling a low chair into the conservatory, she fetches the book, and leisurely proceeds to examine its contents.

Mrs. Stourton, in attires varied as her expressions adorn the first pages. As a bride, bashfully blushing in white; as a wife, smiling serenely in blue; as a widow, mourning discreetly in sable. Each pose is a marvel of grace, while the china-blue

eyes are coy, beaming, or pathetic, as the occasion warrants, and yet Florence does not lingeringly admire them, on the contrary, swiftly turns to the other side.

Her sisters come next. Tall, slightly inane looking girls, generally taken together and giving one the impression that their limited ideas are common property. Mrs. Stourton, who openly bemoaned their plainness and stupidity, was overjoyed to find two brothers (clergymen) whose meek, obliging dispositions made them fall easy victims to her schemes. The result was that both daughters were happily disposed of at the same time.

Florence bestows a smiling glance at them, then passes on, and judging by the bright light that sweeps across her face, discovers a more interesting study.

It is a page devoted to Gerard. Round eyed and chubby-cheeked, he appears in knickerbockers, proudly intent on the contemplation of a new rocking horse. Saucy and self-important, he shows off as a school-

boy, dressed for the cricket field. Handsome and debonair, he stands conspicuously forth amid a group of laughing collegians ; moustached and manly, seems announcing by his travelling suit and portmanteau his departure from England.

Then follow several others, evidently taken abroad, and at these Florence gazes long and earnestly.

“ Three of them were done in Venice,” comments she, aloud. “ And that must have been the very time he met with the intriguing Italian. I wonder did she live there ? ”

Hardly has the question issued from her lips ere a deep voice answers :

“ If you allude to Mr. Hartington’s wife, allow me to inform you her home was in Venice.”

The words are startling enough, but it is not them which causes Florence to spring up with such an astonished cry. She hears without heeding, because in the speaker she recognises an old friend.

“Mr. Berrel!” is her glad, amazed exclamation when speech is possible, and her blue eyes are full of sweet surprise as she frankly extends an eager little hand for his acceptance.

With that look of unfeigned pleasure welcoming him, Oscar Berrel might be supposed to display an equal amount of satisfaction, instead of standing aloft with an air of cold disapproval.

He takes in every detail of the pretty tableau—Florence robed in palest blue, her fair hair wreathed with forget-me-nots, and behind, the brightly lighted drawing-room serving as a background and entrancing the charms of the cool, secluded retreat which she has sought, and yet no faintest expression of admiration alters the stern gravity of his face.

Finding her proffered hand ignored, Florence gives a quick, shy, upward glance, and is dismayed to read not the smallest approach to friendliness in either look or manner.

His dark eyes meet hers steadily, with

something almost scornful in their shining depths ; not one gleam of the old soft gentleness remains.

Completely discomfited by this revelation, the embarrassed girl stoops to regain the fallen album, and, half unconsciously, re-opens it at the place dedicated to Gerard.

“ Ah, you are anxious to resume the delightful employment from which I disturbed you,” is the loftily contemptuous observation, that rouses her from a purely mechanical contemplation of her lover’s features. “ If I had not come here on purpose to say a few words to you, I should most certainly not have interrupted the attractive study that engrossed your sight, hearing, and evidently thoughts.”

The low, cutting tones pain Florence infinitely ; but, struggling for composure, she responds, with tolerable calmness :

“ I am sorry not to have noticed you before. Until you spoke, I had not a notion anyone was in the conservatory save myself.”

“ Which accounts for your remarks about Mr. Hartington’s wife, at least I conclude she was the lady referred to as ‘the intriguing Italian,’ because it was after his marriage with her that those photographs were taken in Venice.”

“ You are misinformed; Mr. Hartington was never married to her,” answers Florence, shortly, a touch of defiance dispelling the reluctance with which she usually dwells upon this disagreeable subject.

“ He told you that? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Scoundrel! He murders her, and then takes away her good name. Oh, my love, my martyred one, you shall yet be avenged, fully, amply avenged, and terrible will be your traducer’s fate.”

An awful look crosses Mr. Berrel’s face as he speaks, and his voice, though hardly raised above a whisper, strikes terror to Florence’s heart. Former bursts of passion have bewildered and alarmed her, but

this is simply appalling, and with a horrible dread lest he should wreak bodily vengeance upon some one, she rushes forward and seizes him by the arm, gasping, excitedly :

“ What do you mean? Are you talking of Gerard? ”

Her white, frightened face, and the convulsive grasp of her trembling fingers reveals the agony of fear into which she has fallen, and recalls him to himself.

His next words are uttered in comparatively calm tones, and a shade of pity relaxes his rigid features, as he says :

“ I thought you knew all this when you engaged yourself to Gerard Hartington; and yet I might have guessed that he would concoct some lying story or other.”

Florence draws back a step, alarm giving place to anger.

“ I am entirely at a loss to understand your meaning,” she observes, stiffly. “ If you wish to abuse Mr. Hartington, his affianced wife is scarcely the person to select

as a confidant, therefore I decline to listen to further remarks on the subject."

"But you *must* listen," retorts Mr. Berrel, decidedly, stern displeasure quenching the compassionate light that a moment before softened his eyes. "In 'nine little days' you are to be married. Before that time your intended will be lodged in jail for the murder of his late wife."

"How dare you," ejaculates Florence, her fair beauty transformed by the passionate wrath she feels. "Having successfully played the spy is no guarantee that you will be equally fortunate in other deceits. To try and force me to believe that Mr. Hartington was married is useless; while, as for the other accusation, were it not so wicked it would be fairly laughable."

"Then you persist in paying no attention to what I say?"

"I do."

"So be it; where simple truth fails proofs must be brought forward. Kindly read that."

Florence hesitates, looking doubtfully at the document he holds out. A mist of suspicion clouds the complete confidence she before felt in this man, and the remembrance that he stooped to the lowering post of eavesdropper rankles in her mind. At length, moved by a sudden determination to end the whole unpleasant business, she takes the paper he offers her, and opening it finds that it is the marriage certificate duly signed and registered. After a hurried glance at the names and date, Florence thrusts them from her with an expression of loathing and distrust, her pale lips faltering :

“The thing is a forgery.”

“You give me credit for a very small amount of honesty, I must confess,” answers Mr. Berrel, haughtily. “Had any one else favoured me with similar insults I should not have condescended to explain matters further. As it is, I do not mind making another attempt to disillusion you with regard to Mr. Hartington. Probably

you know his handwriting well enough to be sure that these are genuine, if so they may convince you that my statements are correct." Thus speaking he tenders her a packet of letters and coldly watches the shrinking manner in which she examines them.

Gerard's penmanship is unmistakable, a bold, dashing style, with numerous twists and flourishes that it would be almost impossible to copy, and Florence shivers as she owns to herself that he must indeed have written them. Tremblingly she glances through the first, which runs :

" **MY OWN DARLING VIOLA,**

" I have just heard of the very house to suit us, so rush off this morning to inspect it. I hope to be with you in a few hours, at latest, but, in case anything should prevent that, write this line to set your mind at rest as to my whereabouts. *Au revoir*, dearest one.

" **Yours, ever devotedly,**

" **GERARD HARTINGTON.**"

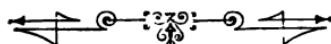
Upon reading this note, Florence gives a quick, relieved sigh. After all, it tells nothing that she did not know before, the tone is purely loverly.

“There is no mention of marriage here,” she cannot help exclaiming in accents of triumph, turning towards her silent companion.

“Read the rest before judging,” he replies, austerely, irritated by her evident satisfaction.

Florence complies with his sternly given request, and peruses letters which Gerard most likely has no idea still exist.

Letters breathing passion and tenderness, written during the brief year of perfect happiness which succeeded Viola’s marriage, when a day’s absence seemed a most formidable separation to both young people.



CHAPTER VII.

FLORENCE HEARS THE TRUTH AT LAST.

Behold
Upon her face there was a tint of grief,
The settled shadow of an inward strife.

“ **A**RE you at length persuaded that Mr. Hartington lied when he declared he was not married ? ” asks Oscar Berrel, slowly, as, having finished reading the last letter, Florence drops into the chair beside her, half thinking she is the victim of some torturing nightmare.

Roused by his voice, she looks up, mute, tearless, with all the light and gladness gone from her dazed blue eyes. He repeats the question. Then comes a rush of comprehension, and, starting to her feet, she cries, sharply :

“ No, I cannot, will not, believe that

Gerard deceived me. There may have been some kind of ceremony, but not that—not that. It *could* not be, otherwise—oh, I cannot explain!" Florence breaks off, a crimson flush colouring her pallid cheeks at the memory of the secret marriage Gerard had pleaded so earnestly for, and circumstances had alone prevented. "What if he really had a wife then?" is the thought that flashes through her mind and drives the blood once more to her heart.

"I think I understand your meaning," answers Mr. Berrel, more gently than he has yet spoken. "About three years ago Mr. Hartington came forward as your lover, and, in the end, urged you to marry him privately, being perfectly aware that neither your mother nor brother would sanction the match, because they guessed at the truth he was striving to conceal."

"No, no; mamma only objected on account of there being someone else whom she thought richer," interrupts Florence, with eager candour; "she had not the

remotest notion Gerard was—was another woman's husband, and I don't believe it now," adds the poor girl, making a despairing effort to battle down the rising tide of mistrust which threatens to engulf every hope of future happiness, and leave her mind a surging chaos of miserable uncertainty.

"If you wilfully shut your eyes to proofs, and obstinately refuse to credit my revelations, there remains, of course, nothing more to be said, except that for the boy's sake I think you might show a little more readiness to own how cruelly his mother was treated."

Speaking in cold, hard tones, Mr. Berrel makes a movement to depart, but is detained by the look that crosses Florence's face at his last words.

"The boy," she repeats, bewilderedly, "do you mean your nephew?"

"Yes—and Mr. Hartington's son."

A wild, dismayed stare is her sole reply, and, half relenting of the harshness with

which he made this announcement, Mr. Berrel proceeds to give a brief description of the mode in which he obtained the child, and the real relationship existing between them. Then, finding Florence makes no remark, he goes on to sketch Viola's life. Her innocent girlhood, her perfect beauty, her pure, noble character; all he dwells upon with loving pride, until the sweet womanly nature stands out fair and spotless, and the bright, dauntless spirit, is revealed in its varied witcheries.

In black contrast he paints Gerard Hartington, not as he seems, but as he is. A selfish, heartless unprincipled man, bent on gaining his own ends, yet full of cowardly fears. Violent tempered, and devoid of natural affection, a deserter of wife and child.

Listening to the story of his short-lived love, and the cruel, relentless hatred that succeeded it, Florence shudderingly awakens from the confiding repose she has hitherto felt in her lover's statements with

regard to Viola. She now in some measure comprehends his true character, and with a shock of horror looks back at the doom from which she was saved by the merest chance.

Perhaps the fact that little Oscar, whom she loved so intensely, was the sufferer by Gerard's conduct helped her to realize his utter falseness, and, forgetting her own wrecked hopes, to exclaim with sudden passion :

“ You are right, Mr. Berrel ; from first to last he has deceived me. There will be no wedding next week, and I beg your pardon for ever doubting you”

“ Poor child, it is hard upon you,” is the pitying reply, as, with a strangled sob, she pauses abruptly. “ But it is only right ; he must be brought to justice, and the sooner the better.”

“ To justice ? ” echoes Florence, a dim sense of some greater shock being about to follow, filling her heart with shadowy forebodings.

“Yes. Do you suppose I intend my foster-sister’s death to remain unavenged; do you think, in after years, the boy would know a moment’s peace, if he neglected this chance of bringing his mother’s murderer to receive the just reward of his crime?”

“Oh, this is too horrible! Gerard may have been mean, base, but he could not have really murdered her,” ejaculates the trembling girl, in awed, hushed tones.

For answer, Mr. Berrel recounts all he witnessed on the night of Viola’s fall, and further goes on to tell the events which ensued, and the vow made beside her lifeless body.

“It was very wrong to burden that mere infant with such a dreadful responsibility,” is Florence’s indignant comment. “Poor darling! no wonder he looked so unnaturally grave when I saw him in Italy. You really cannot be going to carry out this scheme,” she adds, pleadingly.

“He is as anxious about it as I am; and, though young, he is cleverer than many

grown people, and quite understands his position; therefore, in his name, the case shall be reopened," comes the steady response, an expression of fixed resolve shining in the black, brilliant eyes.

Florence heaves a quick sigh; she is well aware how determined he can be, and despondingly remembers that for years he has been brooding over this purpose, consequently, will be less likely than ever to relinquish the end he has in view.

After a troubled pause she observes, sadly, but firmly:

"No good can come of harbouring such vindictive feelings, even towards one who has sinned as deeply as Gerard. Aided by you, little Oscar may avenge his mother's death, yet remember it will be done by sacrificing his own father, and that cannot be right. Were he older, he would see this; as it is, you, and you alone, will be to blame if he is the innocent cause of an awful tragedy."

"I am perfectly ready to take all the

blame," retorts Mr. Berrel, with a gesture of impatience. "And I must say it seems very strange to me that *you* should take Mr. Hartington's part. Perhaps, though, you go upon the principle of hating the sin and loving the sinner, and in a short time will be quite prepared to forgive him."

"Some things can never be forgiven," is her quiet reply; and, on that pale, changed face rests a settled, hopeless look, that tells of the despairing knowledge of how utterly blank and void the future will be, without the sweet anticipations and joyous day-dreams which have lately been her solace and delight.

"My dear Florence, are you indulging in a soliloquy?" demands a cheery voice from behind the ferns. "If so, my presence may form a disturbing element, and interrupt the flow of your ideas. However, being armed with sundry messages from Gerard, I take the liberty of advancing, regardless of these dire consequences!"

Before Florence can frame a response,

Turner is by her side, gazing with astonished eyes at the tall, dark, stranger. She hastens to murmur an introduction, and thus, overcome by the painful excitement which Mr. Berrel's news has caused her, and unable any longer to conceal the anguish rending her heart, she lays her head upon Turner's shoulder and bursts into a passion of tears.

Thoroughly alarmed, he does his best to soothe the half-hysterical girl, casting the while decidedly antagonistic glances at her mysterious visitor, and vaguely wondering what could have been the nature of their recent interview.

“Help me to my room,” Florence whispers at length. And, when Turner has complied with this request, she looks at him with heavy, miserable eyes, and says, faintly :

“Now go and speak to Mr. Berrel. He will explain—everything. And, Turner, promise me that you will try to forgive—Gerard, and not encourage others to betray him. Promise me,” she adds more urgently,

between the gasping, long-drawn sobs that come with each laboured breath.

“If Gerard requires partisanship I shall most certainly stick up for him, if that’s what you mean,” replies her brother, soothingly.

“But if people you love are on the other side,” persists she, anxiously.

“They may be counted by twos and threes,” is the careless retort. “Come, child, don’t fret about this business; whatever happens you may be sure I’ll do my very best for Gerard.”

“A promise is sacred with you! No matter how difficult, you will keep it,” returns Florence, an expression of intense relief crossing her tear-stained face, and, happy in the consciousness that he has succeeded in restoring her to tolerable composure, Turner reiterates words by which he unwittingly binds himself to hold aloof from those who are attempting to throw light upon the fate of the woman whose memory he passionately worships.

Kissing his sister, he leaves her, and hastens downstairs to interview Mr. Berrel.

“Perhaps he will have decamped,” thinks Turner, on nearing the conservatory. “Anyway, I don’t expect him to be in the least communicative; he never even spoke a word when Florence introduced us. It’s odd, too, that, though the name Berrel is quite unfamiliar to me, I can remember his face perfectly.”

Perplexed by this thought, he pauses at the drawing-room door, and stares absently into the conservatory beyond.

“Is Miss Liston better?” is the question which suddenly rouses him from a reverie so profound that he has not noticed Mr. Berrel’s approach.

The deep, low tones strike some half-forgotten chord in Turner’s heart. He starts, gives one earnest, scrutinising glance at the speaker, then the honest, blue eyes flash glad recognition, and, darting forward, he exclaims, delightedly :

“In my sister’s friend I find you.”

“And you have not forgotten,” is the quick response, as Mr. Berrel warmly grasps his hand, and looks with a pleased smile into the frank, eager face.

“I have forgotten nothing,” answers Turner, sadly. “Others may treat the past as a sealed book; to me it is always open, especially at this time of the year.”

“Yes; we met in Autumn, and it was then she—the girl you loved, and I loved—was killed,” replies his companion slowly.

The distinct, significant words fall upon Turner’s ear with an awful meaning. He remembers, as if it were yesterday, the whole conversation that passed between Mr. Berrel and himself, on the night alluded to; and wonders now that he did not before connect Viola’s death with the one described by this man, whose sorrow and excitement was so apparent. Through his mind rushes, too, the memory of his last walk with Viola, and her declaration that she intended to tell Gerard all she knew that very night.

“ How blind I have been, how blind,” is his self-condemning thought. “ I might have guessed the truth, have known that it was no accident caused her death. Instead, I believed in her husband’s feigned grief, and in the affection he professed, and for that reason forgave him everything, even the deep insult offered to my sister. Poor Florence, how wrongly I behaved in hiding the real state of affairs from her.”

“ Do you understand?” questions Mr. Berrel, softly, finding Turner remains silent.

“ I understand that I have been the blindest fool in Christendom,” is the passionate retort. “ The woman for whose sake I would gladly have laid down my life was in some cruel, treacherous manner murdered by her husband; and yet, though I knew perfectly that he hated her, I went on treating him as a friend, and even helped to conceal his wickedness from my sister, thus bringing about this engagement.”

“ It was not your fault. Mr. Hartington is as wily as the devil himself, and contrives

to deceive everyone; but his day of reckoning is now at hand."

The savage satisfaction with which this declaration is made startles Turner into closer attention, and meeting his inquiring gaze, Mr. Berrel repeats what he has already told Florence with regard to the fulfilling of his vow to avenge Viola's death.

"You loved her, you will help us," he adds, earnestly, in the assured tone of one who has no doubt on the subject.

Turner is about to eagerly assent when checked by the remembrance of his promise to Florence.

"I cannot," is the answer wrung from his reluctant lips. "If I had known this sooner, it would have been different, but, not understanding what I did, I promised my sister to take no part against Gerard, and my word once given is as binding as an oath."

"Some oaths are better broken than kept," responds Mr. Berrel, with a quick change of manner. "However, I see your

mind is quite made up, so it is useless to bandy words, especially as I have very little time to spare. If you should have anything further to say, you will find me at Bandermoor House."

With this abrupt announcement he turns and strides from the room.



CHAPTER VIII.

LOVE IS SLAIN.

There are things
Whose very breathings on the soul erase
All record of past love, save the chill sense,
Th' unquiet memory of its wasted faith,
And vain devotedness!

FOR several minutes after Mr. Berrel's abrupt departure Turner stands lost in painful thought. Blank despair fills his heart at this unhappy termination to a meeting he has long looked forward to with eager expectation. Bitterly he regrets the promise made to Florence, which has thus estranged him from one whose friendship he was most desirous of retaining.

As for Viola's fate, as yet he cannot trust himself to think of it.

When, at length, with a pale, set face, Turner slowly re-enters his sister's room,

she knows that Mr. Berrel has explained everything, and that her brother, though too honourable to break his word, loathes the position in which he finds himself, and thinks her desire to shield Gerard weak, almost wicked.

“ What do you intend to do ? ” he asks, after stating, in a few cold words the exact amount of information gained. “ Will you return to town with Mr. Hartington to-morrow morning ? ”

A quick dissenting movement of the head, then Florence answers, with considerable firmness :

“ To-morrow morning I will drive to Dr. Carysfort’s house at the hour previously arranged, and tell Gerard all I have heard. If he is willing to openly confess his marriage, and publicly own his child, I am ready to do my very utmost to avert the dreadful punishment Mr. Berrel is preparing for him—whether justly or unjustly, God knows.”

“ And if, as I expect, he says the whole

story is a batch of lies, and refuses to acknowledge the boy, what then?"

"Still it will be my duty to at any rate endeavour to save him," she replies, decidedly. "Nothing can make me for a moment suppose that it would be right to act otherwise."

"Opinions differ," retorts Turner, frigidly, adding, with bitter emphasis: "At any rate, my ideas on this subject are vastly different from yours, although you have contrived to force me into a false position, and made me offend the very man whose interests entirely coincide with my own, and whose friendship I was most desirous of retaining."

"I did not think you knew Mr. Berrel," begins Florence, in surprise, but with a curt good-night, her brother cuts short further speech by leaving the room.

Sad, puzzled, distressed, she sits wearily down to review the position in which she finds herself. The mist has cleared from her mental vision, and, looking back over past years, she now detects many proofs of

LOVE AND ITS

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~~e~~ alone blinded her
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Gerard's selfish, cowardly character, which love alone blinded her eyes to before.

The moment has come when all is understood; and, with a leaden feeling of despair, she realizes that the affection she so confidently believed in was never hers; because in a nature such as his true love could not exist.

When quivering beneath the sharp pain of the first shock her young life had sustained, Florence had wildly mourned her lover's shortcomings, yet, at the same time, had felt some secret satisfaction in the thought that, whatever fleeting passion he might have felt for another, his heart was, and always had been, hers. To this idea she clung through days of mistrust and misery, and, when he once more crossed her path, it strongly influenced her treatment of him.

To-night, however, no such grain of consolation leavens the burden of sorrow overwhelming her. Broken hopes replace bright day-dreams, and in her ears ring, with

cruel distinctness, Mr. Berrel's blunt, uncompromising words.

Bereft of all disguise, the idol she has weakly worshipped stands revealed, and she shrinks from the unlovely spectacle, marvelling at the infatuation which caused her to put implicit confidence in one whose numerous faults now seem obvious enough.

Even Viola, in the first distracting moment when her husband's duplicity was fully revealed, felt no severer pang than does this gentle girl, whose trust has been so wantonly betrayed; yet it is not her ruined life she most deeply deplores. Unconsciously, Florence follows the example of Gerard's other victim, and forgets self in feverish longing to rescue his disowned child. Through the silent watches of the night she sits by the waning fire, trying to calmly think out the best course to adopt with regard to little Oscar. Her love for the boy is the very thing that helps her to partially comprehend his father's baseness; still, not even for his sake, will she go the

length of passively allowing Mr. Berrel to proceed against Gerard Hartington. In some things, the timid, pliant girl can be firm and determined, and in the present instance her mind is made up.

Turner sees this, when he meets her at the breakfast table next morning, and makes no attempt to prevent the proposed interview with her erewhile lover.

Buried in painful thought, Florence hardly notices the constraint of his manner, or the evident desire he has to escape from her society, and when the carriage comes to the door she drives away, without having a notion how completely miserable Turner is, owing to the promise she extracted from him the night before.

At length Dr. Carysfort's house is reached, and pale and heavy-eyed, Florence stands face to face with the man who from first to last has deceived her.

“Why, how early you are, darling,” he exclaims, springing forward, with the evident intention of clasping her in his arms.

Shrinking from his touch with a shivering gesture of dismay, Florence makes no reply, and, surprised at this unusual mode of treating him, Gerard hastily inquires:

“Is anything the matter at Moorview? Turner got home all right last night, I hope?”

“Yes, he is quite well, but—has seen Mr. Berrel.”

“Mr. Berrel,” repeats Gerard, staring at the trembling speaker in unfeigned amazement. “Who in the world is he?”

Raising her mournful eyes, Florence answers, slowly;

“Oscar Berrel is your wife’s foster-brother, and knows, and has told us everything.”

If there lingered in her mind any faint hope that he might yet be able to prove his innocence, it is dispelled, once and for ever, as she observes the expression of his face. A look of horror contracts the shifty eyes, while abject fear whitens cheek, and lip. In that unguarded moment Florence reads

a confirmation of all she has heard ; and, though the next minute he recovers himself, she judges him accordingly.

Vainly does he affect to laugh at her words, and sneer down each allusion to Viola as his wife. She knows he is acting a part, and boldly tells him so.

Such an unwonted display of courage fairly astonishes Gerard. Hitherto Florence has placed unswerving reliance in his various declarations, and to be thus palpably doubted is far from agreeable to him.

“That you should conclude everything that fellow says is gospel, and, at the same time, discredit my assertions, strikes me as strange conduct,” he mutters, aggrievedly, finding nothing he can urge makes the least impression upon her. “Anyway, it is hardly the manner in which to show the love you feel for me.”

“Put that love in the past tense,” she cries, with a sudden, unexpected burst of passion. “God knows how fervent was my love for you ; but now, the womanly dig-

nity you have sought to lower, the trust you would unhesitatingly have betrayed, the whole cruel course of deception you deliberately practiced against me, sweeps love from my heart; and standing here, I can say with truth and unutterable thankfulness—your influence is gone, you have no more power to harm me, because you have slain my confidence, my belief, my love.”

As Gerard listens to her rapid words his thoughts fly back to that evening, long ago, when a beautiful, stately woman stood before him and told the same tale in a voice which rung out one note—contempt.

Again those clear, dauntless eyes seem fixed on his, reading the secrets of his crafty mind. He shudders, then smiles as he remembers her fate.

Watching that slow, evil smile, Florence wonders at her blindness in never noticing it before, and is half prepared for the bullying tone he next adopts.

“Look here, Florence, there’s no earthly

use in getting so confoundedly excited ; it only bores me, and does yourself no good. If I have been unfortunate enough to slay your love, well, we must e'en marry without it, and will, I doubt not, get on as comfortably as most of our neighbours. Therefore, my dear, put an end to this squeamishness, give me a kiss, and let us be off to the station."

"Do not dare to touch me," cries Florence, hotly, the unveiled insolence with which he speaks goading her to spare him no longer. "Have I not told you I know *all*—your baseness, your deceitfulness, your crime. No, it is not your concealed marriage I refer to," she goes on, seeing he is about to make some scoffing reply. "The crime, the awful crime, you committed when you thought none saw, was—murder."

"Hush, girl ! what are you talking of ?" asks Gerard, hoarsely, seizing her roughly by the shoulder, a dreadful expression gleaming in his eyes.

Bravely meeting his restless gaze, she answers, promptly :

“I am merely repeating what I now believe to be a fact, though I would not credit it last night. Oh, Gerard, how *could* you—” she breaks off, melting into tears. “Your wife, the woman you had promised to love—to kill her. It is too hideous a thing to think of.”

“Who has been frightening you with this nonsensical story?” asks Gerard, uneasily, endeavouring to allay suspicions, which cause him the liveliest alarm.

Instead of replying, Florence begins to eagerly plead in little Oscar’s behalf, and not even Viola herself could have spoken more eloquently on the subject. To find out that the child he hoped would never trouble him more is in the safe keeping of Mr. Berrel disgusts Gerard more than words can tell; and, turning round, he sharply and irritably stops further supplication, by the emphatic announcement :

“I intend to have nothing to say to the

boy, so it's no use making this fuss about him. Indeed, I consider it awfully bad taste on your part to mention his name."

Flushing beneath the unmerited rebuke, Florence answers, quietly:

"This is not a matter that can be passed over. Sooner or later the child *must* be acknowledged, and if you do it at once perhaps Mr. Berrel may be induced to drop the proceedings he is at present determined to take against you."

"He will find it preciously difficult to prove anything," is the sullen response.

"Not so; for, oh, Gerard, he was in some secret room at Bandermoor House, he saw you tread on your wife's dress," whispers the trembling girl, excitedly, adding, entreatingly, "Do not waste time by denying it. Be candid with me, and, for the sake of the love that is past, I will do my best to save you from Mr. Berrel's vengeance. He has vowed to bring you to justice, and in the child's name will do so, unless prompt measures are taken."

Terror, mighty, speech-palsying terror, seizes Gerard, as the full purport of her words throbs through heart and brain. Often as he has cowered beneath the idea of discovery, its actual realised presence comes with a shock before which former torturing fears pale into utter insignificance. His treacherous act has been witnessed, not by a stranger, but by the one being most interested in Viola, the very man whose strength of character she often proudly spoke of, and towards whom Gerard had nourished feelings of dislike not unmixed with dread.

Judging by his own vindictive intentions with regard to Thomas, he can easily understand Mr. Berrel's motive in waiting until years have matured his plans, and lulled his enemy into secure repose. To strike a blow when least expected is exactly the kind of thing Gerard likes to do; and being himself vengeful and relentless, he nurses no fond hope of ultimate escape from the dire consequences of his guilt.

Dumb then, and abject, a cowed, hunted expression replacing the gleaming fire that a moment before shot from his eyes, he stands staring helplessly at Florence.



CHAPTER IX.

RIGHT IS MIGHT.

Courage was cast about her like a dress
Of solemn comeliness.

N this supreme hour of misery and perplexity, gentle, timid Florence Liston comes out in a new light.

Reading in Gerard's face his utter inability to aid himself, a great and mighty pity drives from her heart all thoughts of anger against him, and, with a quick, womanly wishfulness to be of use, she flings from her as a mantle the weakness and indecision which has hitherto marred her character, and with calm firmness declares :

“ If you will be guided entirely by me, matters may yet be satisfactorily arranged.”

The sharp, decided tones are so unusual that, despite his perturbation, Gerard be-

stows upon the speaker a glance of unqualified amazement. With her rounded figure well drawn up, Florence looks no longer sorrowful and drooping; the time for action has come, and she has risen to the occasion.

Suffering a wrong which could hurt none but herself would have been powerless to rouse her thus, it is of others she is now thinking; the little one whose young life had been shadowed with so dark a cloud; the man who, cruel and crafty though he may be, was but the night before her affianced husband.

To rescue the son from unconsciously betraying his father; to save the father from the awful fate preparing for him; this is the task that nerves her to be strong, and makes personal troubles appear as nothing.

A few minutes later she re-enters her brother's carriage, and is driven rapidly to Bandermoor House, having, before leaving him, obtained Gerard's reluctant promise

to fall in with whatever proceedings she may see fit to take.

The position is far from an enviable one ; and this Florence thoroughly realises as she nears the gloomy abode in which her rival had been concealed so successfully.

A look of mystified astonishment is Martha's sole response to her inquiry as to whether Mr. Berrel is in, and then it dawns across Florence that his presence at Bandermoor House is unknown, which accounts for Gerard's indifference when she mentioned her intention of calling upon him.

Not wishing to reveal what possibly he is anxious to keep secret, she pauses in some confusion, and half turns from the door. Struck by her evident embarrassment, Martha arrives at the swift conclusion that asking for this gentleman is a mere ruse. Miss Liston's real purpose in appearing being a desire to leisurely examine a house which very probably Gerard Huntington has refused to show her.

“It’s just female curiosity,” comments the good woman to herself. “Like enough she’s heard tell of them gobblers, and wants to know all about them.”

Accordingly, with the most deferential of curtseys, she asks whether Florence will not step inside and take a look round.

Nothing loth, the girl consents, and is soon listening to a voluble account of the strange sounds which have taken to haunting the house. A question or two about Gerard’s former sojourn in it leads Martha on to talk of the time when he arrived with wife and child. Forgetting to whom she is speaking, she breaks into eager praises of both, and with tear-dimmed eyes shows the room, which still, with its faded embellishments, bears testimony to the taste and skill of her late mistress.

Softly and reverently, as if seeking some holy shrine, Florence enters, and looks round. All bitterness, all disbelief in Viola has died away. A yearning compassion fills her heart for the young wife whose love had,

like her own, been so cruelly trampled upon. Only a little of the agony suffered can she understand ; yet that is enough to bring quick tears of sympathy to her eyes. With clasped hands she stands before Viola's chair, and thinks how lonely she must have been sitting there day by day, companionless, save for the child for whose sake she sacrificed every earthly pleasure.

“ How sad it all is—how sad,” ejaculates Florence, sighing and shuddering as she follows Martha from the room, and up the steep torturous steps Mr. Berrel had described only the night before.

“ Ah, it is that,” replies Martha, wiping her eyes. “ She was the sweetest, gentlest lady, and for beauty her face might have been an angel's, that pale and bright like, not with the nasty deathly look most folk with no colour have, but as if a sort of *white* blush was on it, Miss ; I can't explain it no other way ; you'd know just what I mean if you'd seen her.”

Having reached the head of the stairs

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while making this last remark, Martha glances doubtfully at Florence, to see whether she has understood her not too lucid speech. As she thus turns round a rustle and a flounce sounds from behind, then comes a faint roll as of moving panels.

“Them noises are beginning early to-day,” is her composed response to Florence’s start of surprise.

“You don’t seem to mind much,” cries the girl, with a merry laugh, as she remembers the probable cause of the mysterious movement, which for a moment she forgot. Purposely she speaks in loud, clear tones, being most anxious to obtain an interview with Mr. Berrel, and not knowing how otherwise to attract his attention.

A wild commotion follows her words; there is the quick creak of an opening door, an eager subdued cry, and then an angry, excited, childish voice, exclaims :

“Let me go, Sivana; it is, indeed it is, my dear Miss Florence, and I must see her; I

won't stay for you, or uncle Oscar, or anyone."

The next minute a slim, flying form darts past Martha, and falls into Florence's arms, panting.

"They're all cross with me for coming, but I don't mind now I've got you."

"Oscar, little Oscar!" is her glad, half incredulous, response, as she clasps him closely, and looks down tenderly into his sweet, flushed face. Martha the while gazing in dazed astonishment at the small golden-haired apparition.

Clinging to her, with an expression of infinite content, the boy observes, frankly:

"Uncle Oscar does not like me to talk about you, he says you are too weak to be any help, and that the people we hate you love. I don't understand what he means, do you?"

Florence flushes painfully at this candid avowal of Mr. Berrel's feelings with regard to her, and is thankful when Martha diverts

the child's attention, by suddenly coming forward in delighted recognition.

At this juncture Sivana recognises the uselessness of further attempts at concealment, and emerging from a dark passage, deprecatingly makes known her presence. A lively conversation ensued between the two servants, though possibly to both it proved more noisy than intelligible.

Anxious to find out exactly how much Oscar knows of his uncle's intentions, Florence leads him into the adjacent drawing-room, and leaning against her knee, he soon tells everything that has happened since their parting in Venice.

Much that before perplexed her in his mode of alluding to his mother is now explained, and she is better able to check the fiery bursts of passion which follow a cautious suggestion that his father ought likewise to come in for some share of affection, breaks down the strange reserve which Oscar has hitherto maintained on the subject. His slight, sturdy figure is drawn

proudly up. His bright, dark eyes flash, and Viola herself could hardly have answered with more cold dignity :

“ That is a different matter.”

“ But, darling, why ? ” asks Florence, hurriedly.

“ Why ! Would *you* love a man who killed your mamma ? ” he demands, scornfully, going on with ever-increasing excitement. “ Uncle saw him hurt her, and promised, oh, long ago, that when I grew a great big man I’d hurt him, and in a very, very little time I’m to do it. He made her still and white, and so cold, and when I kissed her I told her I would make *him* that one day.”

“ Hush, darling, hush ! it is dreadful to hear you talk like that,” cries his distressed companion, drawing him into her arms with soothing caresses. “ You will never get to Heaven to live with the angels unless you are good, and gentle, and loving, and give up such unkind thoughts. Were your mother here she would tell you the same,

and, remember, she is waiting for you in Heaven, and if her little boy does not get there it will grieve her terribly."

As Florence pauses for breath, Oscar raises his head and gazes at her in evident bewilderment. His baby wrath is calmed beneath this new doctrine which seems in direct opposition to that taught by Mr. Berrel, and yet is brought forward in his mother's name.

Child though he is, his short life has been one continual struggle to do the right, to follow the rules laid down by Viola, and be obedient to those around.

Passionate, high-spirited, deeply sensitive, he has fallen in with his uncle's plans, and nursed a bitter grudge against Gerard, assured that in so doing, he is obeying the unspoken wishes of the dead. Hitherto, no doubt on the subject has crossed his mind, but Florence's words bring a dim, shadowy sense of uneasiness.

Seeing she has attracted his attention, her next step is to plainly point out the

true state of affairs, and the utter mistake he makes in supposing Viola would have desired him to be the avenger of her death.

Breathlessly he listens, and at length understands the lesson she is striving to teach.

The idea that, by following Mr. Berrel's advice, he may forfeit all hope of meeting his mother in heaven, fills the boy's heart with fear and consternation. To find that he cannot fulfil both his own and his uncle's desire, disturbs and perplexes him, yet clearly enough he takes in Florence's meaning.

Right and wrong are no mere names to Oscar ; when placed side by side he is able quickly to detect the difference, and rarely hesitates between duty and inclination. Viola's strong, self-conquering spirit is in him, together with a sweet, trusting belief in everything good, and pure, and true.

With the wonderful intuitive knowledge possessed by some children, he, from the first clung to Florence, with the feeling that

she would help him to keep good, better than either Mr. Berrel or Sivana. Her nature, though weaker, was higher, in that it was perfectly simple, and free from bursts of either passion or anger, and he soon learnt to look upon her as a species of conscience, whose gentle reproaches checked faults which others would probably not even have noticed. Absence has not altered this impression, therefore, when she now tells him that it is wicked to harbour revenge against any one, far less his own father, he takes her words into serious consideration, and ends by being convinced of their wisdom. Still, it is difficult to uproot in an hour what it has taken years to plant; and not all at once will he give in. Thoughts of his uncle's wrath, Thomas's despair, Sivana's disappointment, flash through his mind, and with a swift, petulant movement, he draws himself away from Florence, saying, sharply :

“ Uncle is right, you won't help us ; you

want to make me weak. It's very unkind of you."

"I want to save you from doing what you would regret later on, darling," she answers, quietly, a pained look stealing over her pale face at his defiant bearing.

The next moment the boy's sense of justice prevails. Controlling himself, he turns once more to Florence, remarking, penitently :

"Forgive me for being so rude. I *know* you are right, but it's dreadful hard to have to go against Uncle Oscar and them all. I'll do it though," he adds, resolutely, and Florence knows she has gained the day.



CHAPTER X.

UNCONSCIOUS INFLUENCE.

“Vengeance is God’s,” the Maiden said,
“Even although our sacred dead
All unavenged lie sleeping;
You cannot change that mandate stern,
From hatred’s triumphs you must turn;
There’ll come a time of reaping!”

“**T**’S all up now, Thomas, so there’s no use in my staying here any longer.”

Thus speaks Mr. Berrel an hour later, as he stands on the steps of Bandermoor House and watches Florence Liston drive away.

In respectful silence Thomas waits for further enlightenment, having heard nothing of the nature of the interview just concluded, although Sivana has told him how it comes about that their presence is known to Martha.

“Yes, it’s all up,” repeats Mr. Berrel, gloomily. “The boy has turned rusty, and

defies me. Will have no further hand in the matter, and vows that unless I leave his father alone he will never forgive me. To think that I should have educated him far beyond his years only to have the weapons turned against myself. That a weak, spiritless girl should have influence enough to destroy every vestige of the manliness I so perseveringly cultivated. It is disgusting, maddening, and I encouraged their friendship, considering her such a gentle, harmless little thing."

He pauses, fierce anger darkening eye and brow, and showing itself in the long, swinging strides he takes from end to end of the hall. Each movement of the lithe body reveals the angry impatience he feels ; and when, in answer to Thomas's blank look of dismay, he in a few words explains the mode Florence adopted, and her complete success, his voice quivers resentfully.

"It's just rank rebellion she's been teaching," ejaculates Thomas, aghast at this new state of affairs. "And I should like to know

what business *she* has to meddle with Master Oscar, after going on that disgraceful with Mr. Hartington when my poor mistress was alive, and getting engaged to him afterwards and all."

"Miss Liston knew nothing about his marriage until last night," admits Mr. Berrel, ready to do the girl justice so far. "As for her engagement, she solemnly assured me, under no circumstances, could it be now fulfilled. Indeed, I really believe her sole motive in acting as she has done is a mistaken idea that it is her duty. Personal interest has little to say to it, of that I am sure, because a more utterly conscientious girl I have rarely met."

A remembrance of sweet blue eyes raised beseechingly to his causes this sudden change of tone, and drives away Mr. Berrel's wrathful indignation, as if by magic.

He feels that in both his late interviews with Florence he has behaved like a brute, allowing his rage against Gerard to vent

itself upon her in a manner unjust and and cruel.

After years of patient waiting, to be thus baulked of a hard-earned, deeply-coveted revenge, might fill a better disciplined heart than his with anger and disappointment ; still, he does not indulge in self-excuses ; but, on the contrary, frankly owns to himself that his conduct has been harsh enough to merit looks very different from the mildly reproachful ones which greeted him that morning.

“ Well, sir, I don’t call it conscientious, the way Miss Liston went meeting Mr. Hartington on the sly. Never so much as letting her brother know she saw him,” comments Thomas, with a sniff of lofty derision at this burst of praise, which he neither approves nor understands. “ She’d have heard of his being married but for keeping so close about it.”

“ Yes, in that respect she was wrong. But then, you see, the man worked upon her feelings,” responds Mr. Berrel, excusingly.

“And she follows suit by working upon Master Oscar’s feelings,” mutters the aggrieved servant, glancing shrewdly and suspiciously at the speaker.

Naturally he is highly irate at Florence’s proceedings; having suffered much bodily as well as mental discomfort to bring about what she has thus easily prevented.

Since Viola’s death, his cherished thought night and day had been how best to wreak vengeance upon Gerard. Every insult paid him strengthened this longing, and deepened the hatred smouldering in his breast, yet still he kept quiet, and waited.

At last came the reward. Mr. Berrel appeared, and revealed all. With a joyous sense of freedom, Thomas shook from him the thraldom no longer necessary, and taking advantage of much knowledge gained by bitter experience, hastened to place himself beneath the protection of Mr. Berrel.

Perhaps the close vicinity of buxom, black-eyed Sivana did not detract from the pleasure this change afforded him, although

he was far too dignified to hint at such a possibility. Certainly her bright, cheerful ways helped to dispel the brooding moroseness—engendered by loneliness and Gerard's hated, irritating presence—that at times overcame him.

Contented, then, and comfortable, full of a complacent belief that soon the man who had so remorselessly tyrannized over him will receive the just recompense of his evil works, Thomas is quite unprepared for defeat, and feels the shock almost more keenly than does Mr. Berrel.

Against Florence he has always borne a grudge; having, from the first, resented her intimacy with Gerard Hartington, and being still further disgusted by her engagement to him. Now her shortcomings are crowned by an act stupendous in its results, and his calm contempt turns to lively dislike.

“She's regular audacious, that's what she is,” he says, defiantly, careless as to whether this announcement pleases Mr. Berrel or not. “What call has *she* to start up and prevent

Master Oscar from getting his rights ? Pretending, too, that my mistress would have wished it. My mistress who left home and everything she cared for, sooner than give in to Mr. Hartington, whose last words were, ‘Take care of my boy ;’ that didn’t sound as if she meant him to be treated as a nobody.”

“ Miss Liston’s great wish is to see Oscar righted. Only she does not approve of the mode I intended adopting to bring about that end. She’s religious, you know,” adds Mr. Berrel, vaguely.

“ A queer way to show it ; setting a child against his own flesh and blood,” retorts Thomas, grimly.

“ Is she not rather rescuing him from such a position ? ” asks the other. “ It certainly *does* say somewhere in the Bible that vengeance belongs to—God. ” He brings out the last word a little hesitatingly, unconsciously lowering his voice, while uttering a name strange to both lips and heart.

Not yet has dawned the light of truth

across the troubled surface of this man's life. His stormy soul still lies in profound darkness. Restless and tempest-tossed, he can hardly discern the real from the seeming. Viola's death has had no softening influence. The fire of affliction may melt some hearts, while it sears others into stone-like callousness, and drives them further than ever from religion.

Mr. Berrel's love for Oscar saved him from much evil, but still a vindictive thirst for revenge grew out of the agony suffered, and warped a judgment before clear and unerring.

Florence Liston, with earnest directness had made remarks which, though disregarded at the time, took root in his mind. Now they blossom into life, and he quotes them almost reverently.

Rather taken aback at this unexpected turn to the conversation, Thomas allows a few minutes to elapse ere replying, then, with a triumphant expression of countenance, exclaims :

“There’s a lot in the Bible besides that, sir. I stick to the verses I know, and one is—‘Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed;’ to me that seems plain enough, and leaves no room for shilly-shallying.”

With this parting shot, delivered in a tone of combined satisfaction and anger, he abruptly departs in search of Sivana; into whose sympathetic ears he pours a detailed account of the disappointment caused by Florence Liston’s uncalled-for intervention.

Left alone, Mr. Berrel thoughtfully resumes his promenade, pacing the hall with a slower, less excited step.

In trying to soothe Thomas, he has quieted his own spirit, and can now dispassionately view the complete frustration of a plot which has taken him years to ripen.

Going over the events of the morning, he remembers with amazement the firm decision displayed by Florence. Hitherto, a slight feeling of contempt has mingled with

his admiration for her. The clinging timidity of her nature struck him as weak—though he admitted its sweetness, and charms—and, in as far as will was concerned, he imagined she was devoid of the least atom. Never having studied women's characters, he knows nothing of the strength that love gives to even the weakest, or the manner in which they will turn and do battle for the very one whose cruel actions have broken their heart.

Florence is changed, but *how* he can hardly tell. The seal of suffering set upon brow and cheek might have enlightened him, had he understood that heavenly comfort is given with earthly trial, that it is in the wilderness the true believer hears most clearly the voice of consolation, and is led from thence to streams whose life-giving waters might otherwise have been passed untasted. But Mr. Berrel has no knowledge of such balm, therefore he marvels at the patient strength displayed

by Florence, and vainly tries to discover some clue to account for it.

While he thus shapes his thoughts, in accordance with this softened mood, and half forgets former anger and disappointment, the author of these mingled feelings is rapidly approaching Dr. Carysfort's house.

Deeply distressed though she is at having had to oppose Mr. Berrel, Florence yet is thoroughly satisfied with the result of her interview with Oscar. The boy has come up to all her expectations, and shown himself brave and fearless; ready rather to incur his uncle's displeasure than do what is wrong.

Ultimately she has little doubt things can be easily and quietly arranged, if only Gerard Hartington will listen to reason, and consent to acknowledge his child's claims.

Upon this point she has strong misgivings. The man who, but the night before was her dearly loved, affianced husband,

now seems almost a stranger ; his moods must be carefully studied, and his uncertain temper taken into account. Anxiously she remembers how violent he has often been when hardly provoked at all, and how obstinate and dogged is his nature ; though a coward, she knows him to be quite capable of holding out to the very last, if, by so doing, he imagines anything is to be gained.

“ However, I must do my best,” is her quick decision, as she once more alights at the doctor’s door.



CHAPTER XI.

FORSAKEN.

The woes of men—pain, death,
Remorse, and worldly ruin; they are little
Weighed with the woe of woman when forsaken
By him she loved and trusted.

NEEDLESS of the servant's evident surprise at her re-appearance, Florence hurries into the room in which she last saw Gerard.

One glance round shows that it is tenantless.

“Where is Mr. Hartington?” she demands, a sudden, unexplainable dread giving sharpness to both look and tone as she turns to the startled domestic.

“Surely, miss, you know that he went off by the first train to London,” is the hesitating reply. “I thought you was going

too," adds the girl, curiosity overcoming alarm.

"No, I altered my mind," answers Florence, trying to speak composedly, as she meets the inquisitive eyes fastened on her face. "I suppose Mr. Hartington did not leave any message?" she concludes, with a laboured attempt at indifference.

"No; he went away all in a hurry, being late, and master drove him to the station. Here's master coming back," responds the servant, hastily, retiring to inform Dr. Carysfort of his visitor.

"Why, Miss Florence, what's up?" is the doctor's greeting, as he shuts the door and takes her small, trembling hand in both of his. "Mr. Hartington insisted on my driving him to the station, saying you would be sure to meet us there, and then, when you never came, he just scribbled a note and told me to give it to you, as he really must get back to town by that train. He seemed in an awful fluster, and paid not the least attention to a word I said. The

only thing I can think is that you and he have quarrelled, am I right?"

"Partly," replies Florence, sadly. "And yet I did not mean to quarrel with him, and it was unkind, *very* unkind, to go off without seeing me again. But, show me the note," she goes on, eagerly, "perhaps it will explain."

Dr. Carysfort silently hands her the pencilled scrawl, and, while she reads it, his earnest gaze scrutinizes the pained expression resting on lip and brow, and marks the dejected droop of her girlish form.

What has caused these marks of suffering to transform her bright young face? Something connected with Gerard, he knows well, and feels that to hate such a man is a most praiseworthy action.

"Perhaps she has found out about his marriage," is the idea that flashes through his mind.

As if in answer to this thought, Florence looks up, and says, quietly:

"Did you ever hear about Gerard's wife?"

Even now the last word comes out with difficulty, and a deep flush dies her pale cheek as she asks the question.

“Ye'es,” assents the doctor, stammeringly, taken aback by the abruptness of the inquiry.

“Do you consider the circumstances of her death were *natural*?” continues Florence, slowly.

“Remarkably unnatural, I should rather say,” comes the dry retort, then, afraid of having committed himself, Dr. Carysfort adds, guardedly: “I believe it was the result of a fall.”

“An accident?” persists his interrogator.

“Well—yes—people suppose so,” he answers, evasively, his love of truth struggling with a desire to spare her.

“And you never had the faintest suspicion she came by her death unfairly?” Florence's voice quivers just a little as she speaks, but her eyes never move from the doctor's reddening countenance.

Thoroughly embarrassed, he tries to

make some jocose observation, relative to the number of questions she is putting to him, then, finding that attempt fail, breaks out with :

“It’s no use trying to deceive *you*, Miss Florence, so I may as well confess that there was a time when I had my doubts upon that point.”

“And you have not yet got rid of them,” she puts in quickly. “Still, you would not wish to resuscitate the past, or, in the name of justice, to hunt down the one who perhaps sinned.”

“God forbid. Such a thought never entered my mind,” replies the doctor, solemnly.

“Then I may trust you to help me; and indeed I need help,” answers Florence, a tremulous intonation giving force to her words.

“First, though, you must come into the other room and have some lunch,” says Dr. Carysfort, decidedly, seeing that the composure she has hitherto maintained is fast

leaving her. “I’ll be bound you had next to no breakfast, while I myself am simply famishing.”

With a grateful glance she acknowledges his considerate kindness, and submits to drop the subject until it pleases him to resume it.

An hour later she has told him all about Mr. Berrel, and in his hand he holds Gerard Hartington’s last letter to her. It has neither beginning nor end, but runs thus :

“By the time you receive this note I shall be well on my way to London. I will acquaint Mrs. Stourton with the manner in which you have thrown me over, and see what she says to the absurd accusations you have seen fit to bring against me. As for the child, of course I will take care that he is properly provided for !”

“Properly provided for means brought up as a small tradesman’s son might be,” comments the doctor, wrathfully. “Evidently he thinks to puzzle you by that ambiguous term, and has not really the

remotest intention of treating the boy as his heir."

"But he must—he must," cries Florence, excitedly. "There is no other possible way of pacifying Mr. Berrel; besides, where could a brighter, nobler little fellow be found, or one for a father to be prouder of?"

"I fancy even a cherub direct from heaven would fail to satisfy Mr. Hartington," is the grim response. "He would find nothing to admire in any child, however perfect, if it had the misfortune to be his own legitimate heir; he has a soul above natural affection."

Remembering the utter heartlessness of Gerard's conduct, Florence does not attempt to contradict this assertion, but merely sighs dejectedly, as she once more peruses his epistle.

"I suppose nothing can be done until we hear from him again," she observes, at length, meditatively. "To-morrow I hope to get Oscar to Moorview, as Mr. Berrel half con-

sented to let him come and stay with us, so long as he himself remains in the neighbourhood, Bandermoor House being no fit place for the boy."

"Then, tell Turner to expect me about dinner time," retorts the doctor, with an effort to regain his usual cheerful manner; "and keep up your spirits, dear Miss Florence; however bad things seem now, it will all be the same a hundred years hence."

With this unanswerable truism ringing pleasantly in her ears, Florence rises to take her leave, feeling that in this blunt, honest doctor, she has found a friend who will be always at her service, and whose aid will be both prompt and valuable.

The dinner-bell is pealing sonorously when she arrives at Moorview, and though she sees her brother in the hall, he does not come forward with the faintest show of interest. Even the servants look at her askance, not understanding the reason of her altered plans, and scenting from

afar some probable quarrel with her lover.

It might be a strange house she is entering, so different does it appear to her. Hardly can she believe that it was only the night before she parted from Gerard, upon the very threshold she is now crossing. An eternity seems to have elapsed since then; love, hope, confidence, are dead as the flowers that wreathed her fair head when it bent back to receive love's last kiss, and a shadow of thick darkness surrounds the future that glowed with a rosy light such a little while before. No wonder her cheek takes a paler tint, as she moves upstairs, and a rush of blinding tears comes into the sad, blue eyes.

“How weak I am still,” she murmurs, half impatiently, dashing away the briny drops, and hurriedly proceeding to change her walking dress for one more suitable for evening wear.

When she enters the dining-room, Turner gravely seats himself at the table, without

once glancing in her direction. The cold aloofness of his manner tells, more distinctly than words could do, what a barrier has risen between them, and how impossible it is for him to forget that the promise she obtained was the result of a species of deceit practised against him. Not until the meal is almost over does Florence break the silence which reigns between them, or attempt to enlist his sympathies in her morning's undertaking. Even when all is told, the expression of his face does not change; though when Oscar's name is mentioned he looks quickly up.

“ You will not mind having the little boy here for a few days? ” interrogates his sister, nervously, conscious of this swift glance, and misinterpreting it.

“ Mind ! I should think not. I only wish he could stay here altogether,” is the hearty response which considerably surprises her. “ I suppose,” he adds, hesitatingly, “ there is not the least chance of Mr. Berrel coming too.”

“ No, I fear I have dreadfully offended him,” answers Florence, sadly.

“ People must act up to their lights. If you had allowed me to act up to mine, I would not have lost the friendship which I prize for the sake of shielding a scoundrel who richly deserves the punishment prepared for him—a dastardly, cold-blooded ruffian, who deliberately murdered an innocent, defenceless girl. By Jove, what can you be made of to want to defend such a man,” concludes Turner, pausing in his breathless speech, and making this inquiry in a voice trembling with excited scorn. Never before has Florence seen her brother so roused. She sits in frightened silence, staring at him with large, alarmed eyes, and perfectly unable to attempt the faintest reply.

“ Man, indeed! it desecrates the word to use it in connection with him,” continues Turner, fiercely. “ His handsome, deceitful face is only fit to figure in Madame Tussaud’s chamber of horrors ; there he would be with congenial spirits.”

“Oh, Turner, how can you?” gasps Florence, shudderingly, but her words fall on heedless ears, for, ere they are finished, he has disappeared.



CHAPTER XII.

A LAST APPEAL.

Thinkest thou it possible
I ever shall behold his face again?

NEXT morning Oscar and his nurse arrive at Moorview, and, in amusing and looking after him, Florence forgets half her trouble.

For a week she is almost happy; her devotion to the boy having softened Turner's heart towards her, and made him more ready to forgive the duplicity practised against him. True, a slight feeling of uneasiness arises whenever she remembers the threat contained in Gerard Hartington's note, and couples it with the ominous silence maintained by her mother.

“It is strange,” she muses one day,

while playing absently with little Oscar's golden curls, as they sit together on the lawn, "mamma generally is so fond of letter-writing. Besides, I thought she would be angry with me for staying here."

At this juncture all doubts upon the latter subject are removed by the unexpected sound of her mother's voice close behind.

"Pray, Florence, how much longer are you going to remain at Moorview, playing the fool?" is her greeting, and the harsh, contemptuous tones cause Florence to start round with a look of distressed surprise.

Well she knows the expression resting upon Mrs. Stourton's comely face, the hard, icy light gleaming from her eyes. In such a mood she is far from a pleasant companion, and, clasping both hands tightly together, Florence braces herself for the coming struggle.

Nor is she spared.

With a cold clearness that makes each word cut like a knife, her mother proceeds

to deride—firstly, her mad infatuation for Gerard Hartington ; secondly, her blind obstinacy with regard to him ; thirdly, her present senseless, groundless, idiotic scruples.

“ What are you afraid of ? The woman is dead,” sneers Mrs. Stourton at the conclusion of her harangue. “ You knew all about her before you became engaged to Mr. Hartington, and surely, with your highly moral ideas, it must afford you exquisite satisfaction to know that he behaved in so honourable a manner, and was really married to her. Young men, as a rule, are not over particular in that respect.”

“ Mamma, how can you ! ” gasps Florence, in shocked dismay.

“ Bah ! you go on like a child of six ; such prudery is perfectly ridiculous in a girl who has seen as much of the world as you have,” retorts her irate mother, impatiently. “ But I know of old, it is no use reasoning with you. Only just tell me

this—do you, or do you not, intend to carry out your engagement?"

"Oh, mamma, how can you ask? I *could* not marry him now, even if he wished it, which he surely cannot do after all that has passed."

"How you do go on! Of course the man has no choice in the matter; and much as he doubtless would like to, he cannot change his bride at the eleventh hour, therefore he sensibly promises to overlook your rude and eccentric behaviour, and to proceed as if nothing had happened."

"I must decline to further this generous proposal," says Florence, with a sudden proud uplifting of her drooping head. "Under no consideration whatever will I consent to become the wife of one whose life has been a long acted lie."

"Cease these irritating allusions to the past, and think of the position you place *me* in," commands Mrs. Stourton. "The wedding guests are invited; the breakfast ordered; the clergyman secured; and, at my

sole expense, I have got you an elaborate trousseau, yet you calmly declare that the marriage cannot take place. People will put you down as mad, while Mr. Stourton and myself will be laughed at by all."

An angry pant concludes the sentence as the speaker pictures to herself the derisive mirth with which her step-daughters will greet the announcement, and the intense amusement it will afford Signor Morelli.

"Mr. Stourton will be pleased ; he never liked my engagement," puts in Florence, eagerly, a tender smile hovering round her lips as she thinks of the kind, courtly old man whose words of warning had come so true.

In a moment Mrs. Stourton's latent jealousy springs to life ; she remembers what a companion her husband makes of Florence, and determines to prevent any renewal of their former pleasant relationships.

Coldly then she remarks :

"It can make little difference to you what Mr. Stourton thinks, as, from henceforth, I

wash my hands of you entirely. I have done my best, and failed in every instance, owing to your stubborn obstinacy ; nothing remains but for us to part."

A feeling of glad relief is Florence's first sensation on hearing this declaration. To her a gay life has no charms ; she loves the rural pleasures of the country far beyond the excitements of a London season, and certainly prefers Turner's society to that of her sarcastic, unsympathetic mother. Still, the thought of her gentle, indulgent step-father causes her to say, earnestly :

" You will let me see you sometimes, mamma ? "

" I may, when I am able to forget your selfish and undutiful conduct," is Mrs. Stourton's unpromising response, as, with one glance at her daughter's quiet but determined face, she turns and slowly trails yards of rich black silk over the emerald sward in the direction of the house.

A brief interview with her son concludes this visit, then she drives away, firm in the

conviction that never was woman more tried in her children.

During the return journey her busy brain vainly strives to invent some plausible excuse with which to deceive the world, and especially the Misses Stourton.

Useless is the attempt, considering she has only one short day to do it in; and, with a ruffled, badgered expression resting on her usually calm, bland face, Mrs. Stourton alights at the London terminus in a sadly perturbed frame of mind.

Quick eyes take in her general aspect, and, before she has time to look round, Signor Morelli's smiling tones inquire whether anything is the matter.

"You here," she exclaims, rather ungraciously, giving him her hand and trying to appear unconcerned.

"Yes, I am waiting for some friends," he answers, carelessly, adding, solicitously: "I thought you looked annoyed—worried."

"And no wonder. I have been to see my daughter, and find her quite unfit for

any fatigue or excitement, so there is nothing for it but to put off the wedding."

"Indeed, what a distressing state of affairs," responds the Signor, sympathetically. "How long has Miss Liston been ill?"

"Oh, some time," is the vague reply, and Mrs. Stourton colours with confusion and vexation as she notes an incredulous light in the bold, dark eyes, searching her face. "It will be a great disappointment to Mr. Hartington," she goes on, more composedly, "and that reminds me that he promised to meet me at the station. I wonder where he is."

Raising her gold-mounted eye-glasses, she stands still on the platform, and contemplates the hurrying throng of people pouring out of the different trains.

"Ah, here he comes," she ejaculates at length, turning to Signor Morelli. Ere he can reply, a daintily-gloved hand is laid upon his arm, while a gay voice cries:

"Is this the way you assist us with our luggage? The train arrived at least five

minutes ago, and poor Catty has been searching for you in every direction."

"Indeed, Miss Stourton, I am very sorry, but—I was detained," answers the accused one, glancing with malicious delight at his companion's reddening countenance.

"So I perceive," retorts Louisa, staring haughtily at her angry step-mother. Just at that moment up comes Gerard Hartington.

Struck by his tall, handsome form, the fickle girl changes her tactics, and astonishes Mrs. Stourton by suddenly addressing her in the sweetest of tones and with the most beaming of smiles.

At any other time the astute lady would have understood and frustrated her design, but her mind is still full of the events of the morning, and her present wish is to escape a *tête-à-tête* with Gerard, so, without further thought on the subject, she hurriedly introduces him to Louisa, then begins conversing with Signor Morelli. That gentleman displays a laudable desire to soothe

her ruffled spirits, and soon, in listening to his flattering speeches, her face assumes its ordinary expression of calm self-complacency. The knowledge of Catty's close proximity makes him throw much extra warmth into his manner, therefore it is hardly surprising that Louisa, having quickly discovered that Gerard Hartington is of a congenial mind, should observe, half laughingly, half sneeringly:

“The pair in front seem to get on uncommonly well together; look how sweetly attentive the Signor is.”

“By Jove, yes; and mark the affectionate sparkle in Mrs. Stourton's eye,” returns Gerard. “I never before saw her in a spoony mood; I think, though,” he adds, softly, with a lingering glance of bold admiration, “I am even worse myself.”

“That is a matter of course, considering you are to be married the day after to-morrow,” is the quick response, as she heaves a faint, yet quite perceptible sigh, and looks pensively at him.

“Weddings do not always come off,” he replies, after just an instant’s pause, and the words are accompanied by another long, deliberate gaze into the eyes uplifted to his. Louisa feels her colour rising beneath this steady scrutiny, while his assured masterful manner makes her heart beat in a strange, unwonted way.

Rapidly she arrives at the conclusion that either he has already broken off his engagement, or intends doing so, and that consequently Florence Liston is in a state of despair.

“It is natural enough he could not care for such a poor little insipid thing,” she thinks, remarking aloud, in playful accents :

“Ah, Mr. Hartington, I see you fear I am going to fish for an invitation to the marriage.”

“If ever I marry, most certainly *you* will be there,” answers he, so pointedly that Louisa flushes all over her handsome face, and is thankful when Catty appears,

thus putting a stop to further private conversation.

Ere they part Gerard promises to escort the sisters to the theatre that evening, and it is with a very peculiar smile he announces this fact to Mrs. Stourton.

“They are extremely fast, flighty girls,” comments she, having been ignored by Catty, and resenting Louisa’s short-lived politeness, the reason for which she now understands. “While in Italy, they quite disgusted me with their flirting ways.”

“Indeed! Miss Stourton struck me as most charming.”

“There is no accounting for taste,” is the tart rejoinder, then, with an impatient wave of the hand, as though dismissing an utterly insignificant subject, Mrs. Stourton goes on: “You will want to hear about my visit to Moorview. Florence is as obstinate as ever, and says——”

“Pardon me, I have not the least desire to hear anything about that young lady. My brief infatuation for her is over, and I

intend to choose a bride from another quarter. Kindly tell her this, and allow me to wish you good-morning."

With these words, Gerard raises his hat, and is gone.

In the last insolently triumphant glance he vouchsafes her, Mrs. Stourton reads the signs of the times, and guesses that he will contrive to completely turn the tables upon Florence, making all suppose that she has been jilted by him.



CHAPTER XIII.

GERARD'S REVENGE.

*Clocks go as they are set ; but man—
Irregular man's never constant, never certain.*

“ ~~ULLO~~ UULLO ! what an extraordinary thing.” The speaker is Turner Liston ; the person addressed Oscar Berrel, who, upon coming to fetch away his little nephew, has been persuaded to spend a few days at Moorview.

They are sitting together at the breakfast table, Florence not having yet put in an appearance.

“ What is the matter ? ” asks Mr. Berrel, glancing up from his letters upon hearing this astonished ejaculation.

For answer, Turner hands him the morning paper, pointing out the following announcement :

“At St. George’s, Hanover Square, by the Hon. and Rev. Charles FitzHugh, assisted by the Rev. James Stourton, uncle of the bride, Gerard Hartington, of Berklands, Surrey, etc., etc., to Louisa, second daughter of Edward Stourton, Esquire.”

With a darkening brow Mr. Berrel reads the simple but fateful words.

Amazement holds him speechless.

Gerard married, and to Louisa !

Again and again he repeats the news to himself, hardly able to take in its meaning.

To please Florence he has refrained from harming Gerard, and this is the result. The man escapes scot-free, and begins life anew with a girl whose ideas of the world in general closely resemble his own, and who will most likely join him in repudiating all Oscar’s claims.

Stung by these thoughts, Mr. Berrel suddenly springs from his chair, and unceremoniously departs through the open window.

Having caught a passing glimpse of his

face, Turner does not attempt to follow. He, to some extent, understands this fiery, passionate nature ; for their friendship, so strangely begun, so rudely shaken, has strengthened greatly during the few days they have spent together. Each knows and respects the other's sorrow, and the bond of sympathy is widened by their mutual love for Viola's child.

Long ere this both have decided that the boy must be brought up independent of his father, though with a clear knowledge of how matters really stand in regard to the future. For the present he is to live with Mr. Berrel in Venice, but Turner has extracted a promise that he is to visit England at least once a year, and make his home at Moorview.

Lost in gloomy thought, Turner once more pores over the newspaper, until the door opens, and Florence enters the room.

Her face is bright with returning health and spirits ; no one would recognise in her the pale, sad girl of three weeks before.

“ Well, brother mine, where is our visitor ? ” questions she, glancing round the room with a smile. “ I can see he has been here by that array of disturbed letters. Thomas is the pink of propriety in his mode of placing them beside our plates—witness my neat pile ! ”

Crushing up the paper in his hand, Turner tries to look unconcerned, as he replies :

“ He has been rather put out about something, but will be in presently.”

“ Ah, I hoped he would have no worries while staying with us,” remarks Florence, regretfully, absently beginning to examine her letters.

Suddenly she gives a quick, amazed exclamation, and eagerly reperuses the scented epistle she holds.

Her brother watches her anxiously, certain that it contains information about Gerard, and fearing the result of an abrupt disclosure of his marriage.

He is relieved to observe that beyond a

decided expression of surprise, she does not seem much moved, indeed there is an almost pleased light in the eyes she turns towards him.

“Read this; it is from mamma, and the news is simply astounding.”

Her tone expresses nothing but comical wonder, and Turner smiles, with a sensation of intense thankfulness, as he takes the note she offers him.

Mrs. Stourton was evidently in a deeply indignant mood when she wrote; and, without the smallest preface, dashes into the subject of Gerard Hartington's marriage.

Louisa's “sly, designing ways” are commented upon at length; and, in a most charmingly explicit manner, Florence is told that her folly has wrecked all her prospects in life, as Gerard has made everyone suppose that at the last minute he changed his mind and threw over his *fiancée*, to her endless grief and regret.

“The villain! I wish I could make him eat

his own words," cries Turner, upon reading this announcement.

"Nonsense; I do not mind what the world thinks," answers Florence, with an amused laugh; "Madame Grundy's praise or blame hurts me little."

"Still, if I could only get at him," persists her brother, hotly.

"But you can't; for mamma's postscript says that the happy pair are on the point of sailing for India. Just fancy her finding out nothing until the very morning of the marriage; it must have given her a tremendous surprise. Poor Mr. Stourton, I am sorry for him, not being able to attend his own daughter's wedding; oh, I do hope Mr. Berrel won't mind it," she concludes, evidently struck with some new and unpleasant thought.

"What do you mean?" questions Turner, considerably puzzled by this swift change of manner.

"I used to think he—he rather liked Louisa," explains Florence, hesitatingly,

colouring beneath her brother's inquiring gaze.

"Stuff! I have heard him speak with perfect contempt of those Stourton girls," retorts he, with most unnecessary vehemence, looking quite angry at the mere suggestion. "The thing about this marriage that annoys him is that now Gerard Hartington will get everything his own way."

"But does Mr. Berrel know about it then?" demands the girl, quickly:

"Yes, we saw it in the papers."

"And you were afraid to tell me, dear thoughtful old fellow," is her tender exclamation. "You need not have been; that wound has healed at last, though I sometimes doubt whether the cure has not been effected by a wrong means, or at least a dangerous one."

"Occasionally you talk in parables," observes Turner, in response to the conclusion of her sentence, glancing perplexedly into the face that has grown so wistful and dreamy.

“And you have none to interpret! Poor Turner, from henceforth I must try and speak plainly,” answers she, with a flash of gaiety, adding: “I shall really go and fetch Mr. Berrel, it is high time we had breakfast.”

Without waiting for a reply, Florence steps lightly through the window, and soon discovers the object of her search pacing up and down the garden path.

His whole appearance betokens extreme dejection, and, when she touches him gently on the arm, he starts round with a face full of gloom and impatient anger.

Formerly Florence would have shrank from him in alarm, but his very darkest moods are powerless to drive her away now. Fear has given place to tenderest solicitude, and the bursts of passion which used to make her tremble are understood and sympathised with.

The pain and misery she has endured seem to have strengthened the girl’s nature, without taking from its sweetness. She has risen above the souring influence of disap-

pointment, and acquired a steadfastness of purpose, a firmness of will which she never before possessed. Her character has lost the weakness that marred its beauty, and thus gained additional charms, by means of a sorrow, whose crushing weight, falling on another heart, might have taken from it all faith, and truth, and purity.

Softest pity then, is in the look with which she meets Mr. Berrel's half resentful gaze, and undaunted by the ungraciousness of his manner, her voice quivers with emotion as she says, earnestly:

“How sorry I am that you should be troubled like this.”

“Has Turner shown you the paper?” is the hasty question.

“Yes; and I guessed at once that you would—mind.”

“I would mind! and what about yourself, child?” asks Mr. Berrel, his tone softening as he casts a troubled glance into the upturned blue eyes, watching him with eager interest.

“Oh, I am rather glad than otherwise,” she responds, tranquilly. “It was certainly a remarkably unexpected event, still I cannot agree with mamma in considering it in the light of a personal insult. Gerard was free to choose whom he liked; I always knew he would marry, though perhaps not just yet; but it must have surprised you dreadfully to hear about Louisa.”

“What do you mean?” questions he, struck by her tone of sympathetic condolence. “Miss Stourton is no particular friend of mine.”

Florence stares for a minute in evident disbelief, seeing which the dark cloud suddenly lifts from his face, and smiling down upon her, Mr. Berrel exclaims, amusedly :

“Why, I declare you think I am in love with her !”

“She is very handsome,” murmurs the girl, excusingly, drooping her eyes in some confusion at this candid declaration of her secret thoughts.

“So is a sleek-skinned tiger, yet that is

hardly a species of pet to transfer to one's hearth and home. No, no, child; were I thinking of matrimony at all,—which I am not—I would select a far different style of woman to Miss Louisa Stourton. Some flowers can be admired only at a distance; they give light and colour to a landscape, but are gaudy and scentless when examined more closely; while others, milder in hue and less conspicuous, grow sweeter and sweeter the nearer one approaches. It is the latter kind I love to pluck."

"Turner will be wanting his breakfast," observes Florence, prosaically, though his words have brought a warm flush to her cheeks.

"I had quite forgotten such mundane matters," retorts her companion, with a laugh, and, as he follows her into the house, she hears him singing softly to himself, and smiles, well pleased at his recovered spirits.

As they re-enter the breakfast room Turner casts a relieved glance at Mr. Berrel's

cloudless face, from which all gloom and despondency have fled.

Interpreting that look, his friend responds, brightly :

“ Yes, old fellow, your sister has a grand knack of dispelling general moodiness. She completely exorcises the demon of unrest which often tries to get the better of me—she did this morning,”

“ I am glad she can give you some compensation for the trouble we have unintentionally brought upon you,” is the low-toned reply, while Florence disappears behind the urn, to hide the pleased blushes Mr. Berrel’s complimentary speech has called up.



CHAPTER XIV.

PATIENCE REWARDED.

A moment's space is as a year
To him whose crime-stained soul is wrung
With dread alarms and coward fear.
His retribution has begun.

GERARD HARTINGTON is standing with his bride on the deck of an outward bound vessel. Round them are grouped Catty Stourton, Signor Morelli, and a few of Louisa's particular friends.

The whole party seem in excellent spirits, and laugh and talk loudly, thereby attracting the attention of most of them on board, and somewhat disturbing the parting words of the ones whose relatives are bidding them a last adieu.

Clad in a dark suit of navy blue, Gerard is looking remarkably handsome, and Louisa glances at him from time to time with proud admiration.

Already he has gained a wonderful influence over her versatile yet complex nature. Never before has she so utterly abandoned herself to the will of another, or felt such passionate delight in the slightest word of praise.

The pride she takes in Gerard is such that she almost forgets to meditate upon her own charms, thus her superb beauty is enhanced, and she looks more fascinating than ever.

“By Jove, I did well to secure the splendid creature,” thinks her husband, with much complacency. “What a sensation she will make when we get to India. Florence was pretty enough, but without much style to speak of, not fit to hold a candle to Louisa. I am glad I got rid of her, and, at the same time got out of that scrape about the confounded child ; it was a most awfully close shave ; one wrong step and all would have been lost. However, now I am safe, and shall hear no more of him.”

Arriving at this conclusion, Gerard raises his head with a triumphant gesture, then can hardly repress a cry, for, making his way towards him through the crowd, he sees—Thomas.

Had the man's sturdy, substantial form been thin and shadowy as a wraith's, he could scarcely have bestowed upon him a more horror-stricken gaze. The mere sight of him brings up a hundred unpleasant memories. Viola's avenging spirit seems again to hover near, her shining dark eyes to be again fastened on his face. The old dread returns, and, for a moment, he is paralyzed with fear.

Suddenly the need for action stills the tumult rising in his breast, and he slips aside, hoping that the coming interview may not be noticed by the rest of the party.

Dignifiedly Thomas advances straight to the secluded spot where Gerard awaits him, and, without a word, holds out a letter.

Tearing it open with savage haste, he reads :

“SIR,

“If you hope by this marriage to defraud your son of his birthright—Beware! Remember your crime had a witness in me, and only for the boy’s sake, to prevent his being pointed at as a murderer’s son, do I spare you. No matter how many other children you may have, he, and he alone, is heir to all your personal estates; and—as I have lately discovered by his grandfather’s will—he is entitled to receive one thousand a year, upon coming of age, out of property not connected with the entail, therefore at the late Mr. Hartington’s own disposal.

“You see by this that you have really no power in the matter; and, as a parting warning, let me say that if you *dare* to further deny your marriage with my foster-sister, the consequences will be dire.

“Nothing then will stop me from denouncing you as a liar, a coward, and—an assassin.

“Possibly you will hear nothing more on

this subject until your son reaches his twenty-first year ; when that period arrives, wherever you may happen to be, you will be troubled with another communication from

“ OSCAR BERREL.”

White with impotent rage, Gerard crushes the letter into his hand, and turns upon the waiting servant.

“ Be off,” he shouts, anger overcoming caution. “ Don’t let me catch sight of your sneaking face again, or, by heaven, you’ll rue it.”

His loud, unwary tones at once attract Louisa’s attention, and she hurries to his side, closely followed by her friends

“ Gerard, dear Gerard, what *is* the matter ? ” she anxiously demands.

The sound of her voice causes him to choke down his furious wrath, and try to assume a bland expression of countenance, as he responds, quickly :

“ Some confounded fellow—an old

servant, I once had—has been bothering me with a petition, that is all."

"Well, I must say you got dreadfully cross about it," laughs Louisa, with a reproving head shake. "Perhaps the poor man is in distress; anyway, let me read his mysterious missive," and she playfully draws Mr. Berrel's letter from her husband's relaxing fingers.

So perplexed is he by contending emotions that he does not notice her action, until she goes on, vivaciously:

"In your unrighteous indignation you have made it almost unreadable, however, with great patience and perseverance, I may succeed in arriving at its purport. The commencement is, I am happy to state, highly respectful. Sir, it begins—perhaps Honoured Sir *might* have been better, but then people of that class are never quite clear as to what is the correct thing to write, consequently this one writes plain, ungarnished sir."

Here Louisa pauses to smooth out the

paper, and, before she can read another word, it is suddenly snatched from her by Gerard.

The remonstrance she is about to utter dies upon her lips, for at that moment Thomas comes forward, and she immediately recognises him.

“Look, Signor Morelli, it is the very man you and I visited at Mr. Hartington’s chambers,” is her eager whisper to the equally interested Signor.

Aloud she observes to Gerard :

“You really must let *me* settle about this petition.”

“Nonsense; do not meddle in the business,” retorts he, sharply.

Nothing daunted, she persists :

“But I should like to, for auld acquaintance sake, because a former friend of mine often spoke about him.”

“Was that Mr. Berrel?” asks Thomas, moving a step nearer, as the sight of Louisa and Signor Morelli standing together recalls to his mind when and where he last saw them.

“Yes,” answers Louisa, colouring a little at the abrupt question, then, meeting and misinterpreting her husband’s startled gaze, she adds, hastily: “I met him when abroad, he lives at Vence.”

“At present he is in England,” puts in Thomas. “That letter which Mr. Hartington pretends is a begging petition from me is from him, to say—”

“That having taken you into his service, he finds you out to be a rogue,” finishes Gerard, with admirable presence of mind.

“Let us hear *his* version of the case,” says Louisa, merrily, glancing round at the rest, who prepare for an amusing scene, knowing her powers of drawing out people, and guessing from the man’s look that he is of a truculent disposition. “Come,” she goes on, addressing Thomas, encouragingly, “tell us what Mr. Berrel wrote about.”

Warned by the elated air with which he draws himself up, Gerard knows that he is about to obtain an ample revenge for past

insults by revealing all, therefore, without an instant's hesitation, he strides between Louisa and his friends, and, bending over her, whispers, fiercely :

“ Fool, do you want to disgrace me ? Go at once to the saloon, and take these people with you.”

His threatening, almost brutal tone makes her start and turn pale, yet no spark of resentment is in her heart as she silently complies with his command.

For the first time in her life the girl feels that she has a master whom she dare not disobey, and the knowledge has a peculiar fascination of its own.

Even at this early stage of their honeymoon she has seen enough to show her that Gerard will never tire her by a steady, monotonous display of affection ; on the contrary, there is an uncertainty about him which keeps her thoughts continually occupied with him, and is the best safeguard possible to a nature such as hers. To be sure of a man is to lose all interest

in him, and Louisa is far from sure of her hold on Gerard's heart.

Now a new attraction has sprung up. He has ruled her proud spirit and made her do his will, and, not possessing the fine discernment necessary to detect the difference between strength of character and mere perverse obstinacy, she imagines him a superior being, and meekly does what she is told.

With intense satisfaction Gerard watches her. Had he not been brought completely to bay, he would not have ventured to adopt such strong measures, and it is an immense relief to find that she does not resist his authority, or seek for an immediate explanation.

“Who would imagine a woman could be so discreet,” is his mental comment, real, unfeigned admiration in the gaze he casts upon her graceful, retreating figure. “Fancy Florence placed in a similar position! She would undoubtedly have turned on the waterworks, and got me into

an awful pickle, whereas this dear girl goes smilingly off without even a reproachful glance."

Here Gerard's pleasant reflections are interrupted by the loud clanging of a bell, warning all visitors that the time has arrived for their departure from the vessel, and, at the same minute, Thomas's voice sounds at his elbow, saying,

"What message shall I take to Mr. Berrel?"

"None—save that I treat his letter thus," and Gerard flings it far away into the churning stream that flows from beneath a slowly moving steamer.

"Does that mean that you intend to defy him?" asks Thomas, a gleam of hope in his shrewd eyes.

The assent Gerard longs to utter is checked; for, as in characters of fire, he seems to have Mr. Berrel's threat branded on his brain, and cannot forget it.

Noting his silence, the other continues, eagerly :

“Then, I will just tell him that you don’t acknowledge Master Oscar’s claims, nor, for the matter of that, my late mistress’ either.”

“No, no, you must do nothing of the kind,” cries Gerard, detaining him, as, with a triumphant smile, he prepares to depart. “I am willing to do anything in—in reason, for the boy.”

“And you own he is your heir?”

“I do *not*,” thunders the badgered man, desperately, forgetting former prudent resolves.

“Then it’s exactly as I thought,” answers Thomas, delightedly. “You do defy Mr. Berrel. Yes, yes, things will go swimmingly now. Good-bye, sir, a pleasant journey to you, I hope you won’t find it disagreeably hot in India.”

There is a significant meaning in his last words, which recalls Gerard to a sense of the danger he runs.

Distracted by a thousand fears, he hesitates, and allows Thomas to move some paces away.

Finally, dread of Mr. Berrel's revenge overcomes every other feeling.

"Stop," he calls out, imperiously, and the servant stands still and regards him inquiringly, a twinkle of amusement in his eyes the while.

"Tell Mr. Berrel that if I am bothered no more about the boy in the mean time, I will be sure and let him have the money he is entitled to upon coming of age, without any fuss; and also say, that having made this promise, I expect him to be quiet about —other matters."

As he finishes speaking, Gerard decamps; not before, however, he has caught sight of a broad, exultant grin on Thomas's usually stolid face.

"Ha, ha!" laughs that jubilant individual. "He has had a precious fright, and got fine and humble in the end. After all, Master Oscar has gained everything in a nicer way than if I had had the management of Mr. Hartington; though it does rile me to think of that villain getting mar-

ried so comfortably," concludes he, irately, as he leaves the vessel, and looking up, sees Gerard and Louisa once more on deck.

Her face is wreathed in smiles as she waves an adieu to her friend, then turns to her husband.

"Darling," he says, softly, "I have had news, bad news; that was what made me so cross to you. Can you forgive me?"

His tender tone, his loving touch, moves the girl strangely.

"I could forgive you almost anything," she answers, with an earnestness she rarely displays.

"Then you will stick to me, even when you know that, through my own folly, I have hardly got a sou to leave to you—or others, at my death."

"It is you I love, not your money," she replies, passionately. "Besides, have not I enough for both?"

The girl's devotion stirs all that is good in Gerard; meeting her admiring, adoring look, he responds, impetuously:

“ You and I will be happy together, Louisa, for we understand each other.”

Never has he spoken with greater warmth; and in after years Louisa often recalls his words, and contentedly confesses their truth.

She has not set up a grand ideal, therefore has no dream to start from. She knows men and their ways, and never irritates Gerard by taking him to task for his conduct, consequently gains an ascendancy over his heart which neither of the other truer, purer, women who loved him, ever did.

And when the blow falls, when she finds out why her little ones will never inherit an acre of their father's estates, she does not shrink away in anger, but, with a smile and a sigh, declares

“ Men's ways are past finding out.”

CHAPTER XV.

A KINDLED FIRE.

Shall not woman's heart, from chill despair,
Wake at love's voice?

WO years have slipped by.

Thomas is now at Venice, staying in the very house occupied by Viola during the first happy period of her married life.

Ever since bidding Gerard Hartington a triumphant farewell, he has lived with the Listons, and grown strongly attached to them both. When, therefore, Turner decided upon spending a year in Italy, it was Thomas who undertook all trouble connected with the move, and who finally established them in the place he loved best, for his dead mistress' sake.

Sivana is enraptured at their arrival, and

makes continual excuses for leaving Mr. Berrel to his own devices, and carrying off his nephew to display to these appreciative new comers.

She may well be proud of Oscar, for he has become handsomer than ever. His frank, fearless face reflects the true nobility of his nature, while the sweet, winning manner inherited from Viola seems to have increased with his age.

“He is the dearest, brightest, most beautiful boy to be met anywhere,” is Florence’s summing up of him, and her enthusiasm being shared by Mr. Berrel, Turner, Thomas, and Sivana, the only wonder is that he is not hopelessly spoilt.

As a fair summer’s dream are those months to Florence. Each day as it passes seems fuller of perfect delights than the last ; and yet, to an outsider, they would appear quiet and uneventful enough.

Long hours spent in Mr. Berrel’s painting room when she sits beside him, often in silence, watching his busy brush ; after-

noons devoted to exploring expeditions, with still the same companion; and then, delicious evenings, fraught with a wordless charm as they glide softly over the swiftly flowing waters, while Mr. Berrel sings in his rich, clear tones songs full of fire and passion; or again, tender, dreamy serenades, which causes even Turner to listen breathlessly as if fearing to lose a word.

His magnificent voice brings many a lady to her balcony, and southern beauties drop flowers into the gondola as it steals by, their white, jewelled hands gleaming in the darkness as they stoop to tender their dainty gifts.

All this makes Florence almost imagine herself in fairyland, and she is hardly pleased when an additional member is added to their party, in the person of Signor Morelli, who suddenly turns up in Venice.

Mr. Berrel frowns, but says nothing, so—without really any special invitation—the Signor joins their various expeditions, and, in some unaccountable way, succeeds

in putting a stop to the pleasant morning visits Florence before indulged in, and also to the numerous *tête-à-tête* rambles she used to have with Mr. Berrel.

How it comes about she cannot tell, but gradually the breach thus raised between them widens. She grows timid and uneasy; he stern and resentful; and at last their friendship has, to judge by appearances, taken to itself wings and fled away.

If asked to sing, he bluntly refuses, with an ungraciousness of manner quite new to him; and, as her every attempt at conversation is treated in a similar mode, it is scarcely surprising that in the end she turns to the ever ready Signor, who shows such eager alacrity to please and amuse her.

He, too, possesses a voice which, though by no means equal to Mr. Berrel's, is still powerful and well-trained, so that they do not lack music. Yet, to Florence, the whole thing has changed.

Her soft laugh rings out no more, or,

when it does, a forced, unnatural sound takes from its sweetness, while her spirits become sadly uneven.

“Are you ill, Florence?” asks her brother, one evening, noticing that, after an hour’s gay chatter with Signor Morelli, she abruptly relapses into perfect silence, and leans back in the gondola, looking pale and wan.

“What an absurd question! Of course not,” she retorts, petulantly, flushing feverishly as she feels Mr. Berrel’s dark eyes fixed searchingly upon her.

Turner says not another word on the subject, but notes, with much uneasiness, how excitedly she begins to talk, as if fearing further remarks. He is puzzled, and, as the days pass by, watches her closely, yet fails to comprehend the reason for such fits of alternate gaiety and depression.

Thomas, who sometimes accompanies them in their excursions, also observes this change in Florence, and ponders much over its cause.

The result of his meditations shows itself in the following declaration, made to Sivana:

“Miss Liston will be marrying soon, of that I’m quite sure.”

“Who is it to then?” demands she, concluding from his confident tone that he has received definite information upon the subject.

“Oh, to one of them, I expect,” is the vague response, and, with a glance of ineffable scorn, she retorts :

“One of them! is it *my* signor you think would marry your Mees Liston, when his heart is with the signora where she lies so cold in England? Ah, no; he loves not as you freezy English, he has the passion, and the heart, and the memory too.”

“Very probably,” interrupts Thomas, drily; “still, grief cannot last for ever, and more unlikely things have happened than what I foretell; however, wait and see.”

This is just what Sivana’s hasty, impetuous nature rebels against, and, with a deeply aggrieved air, she answers, shortly:

“That’s always what you say.”

“Yes, and when you *do* wait, you’ll find out I am right,” he replies, and, being unable to contradict him, she immediately retires from the scene.

A week later, Signor Morelli proposes to Florence Liston, and is unhesitatingly refused.

Vainly he pleads, with all the eloquent fervour at his command; she remembers too vividly the tender interview she once witnessed between himself and Catty Stourton to believe in his protestations of affection for herself.

And yet, that he is really in earnest, there can be little doubt, considering that he is well aware Florence possesses no fortune to speak of. In general, he keeps an attentive eye on the main chance, regardless of mere feminine loveliness, but, in this instance, it is the girl’s fair face, and gentle, retiring manner which has taken his fancy, and it causes him a sharp pang when she firmly announces she can never be his wife.

Had Catty seen him at that moment, she would have scarcely recognised him. The bold, audacious effrontery which half pleased, half alarmed her, is gone ; the reckless, daring characteristic of him has disappeared, as, taking Florence's hand in both of his, he urges her to reconsider the matter.

While he thus bends beseechingly over her, the door opens, and Mr. Berrel walks into the room. Bestowing one frowning glance at the embarrassed couple, he stalks into the balcony, and begins fiercely whistling to himself, in that peculiar minor key practised by men when in decidedly irascible moods.

Disturbed by his presence, Signor Morelli soon departs, and Florence is left alone, much shaken in mind, and doubtful whether to go out and address Mr. Berrel, or quietly to quit the apartment.

Ere she can decide, he stands before her, saying, sarcastically :

“ Sorry I interrupted the flow of your
vol. III. ”

o

friend's ideas ; as a rule, he is glib enough, with witnesses or without ; but to-day I fear I drove him away."

"No ; he was just going," murmurs Florence, nervously.

"To come again to-morrow, like the duns," retorts Mr. Berrel, with a laugh. "Really, Miss Liston, I do not wonder you show due appreciation of his merits, he is certainly a delightfully, attentive cavalier, and ought to be encouraged."

"You think I *encouraged* him," repeats Florence, slowly, as if trying to take in this new and startling supposition.

"According to *my* lights—Yes ; but then, perhaps to you it seems no sort of encouragement to allow the fellow to sit close beside you, or to hold your hand in the way he was doing just now."

"You are unkind, ungenerous," flashes forth she, roused by his tone. "Signor Morelli never accused me of trifling with him, and he surely is the best judge. The truth is, you think neither of us can do

anything right," she concludes, with reproachful warmth.

"Years ago I told you my opinion of Signor Morelli," is the cold response. "It has not altered since."

"In part I agreed with you then, as I do now," puts in Florence, eagerly.

"And yet you listened to his proposals but a minute ago?"

"Yes; I could not do less."

"Neither, I suppose, could you do less than accept him," retorts Mr. Berrel, savagely. "Is it on the principle that tit for tat is fair play, that you intend making Miss Stourton suffer for her sister's appropriation of Mr. Hartington?"

Even as he utters the cruel taunt he regrets it.

Florence does not speak, though the hot colour crimsons her cheeks, and tears rise in the blue eyes she lifts for a moment to his.

"Forgive me," he cries, contritely, on meeting that look of dumb rebuke. "The thought of your marrying that man has

maddened me. I hardly know what I am talking about."

"No, indeed, you don't, if you conclude I am going to marry Signor Morelli," she answers, faintly smiling. "Ladies are allowed the option of refusing even 'delightfully attentive cavaliers.'"

"Oh, child, how thankful I am! He is no fit companion for you, and yet—I feared you liked him."

"There is a difference between liking and loving," is her soft reply.

Mr. Berrel does not at once respond. The bright, relieved look called up by her words leaves his face, and he stands staring absently into a remote corner of the room.

His mental vision has conjured up Viola's image. Her pale beauty shines upon him as it did years before in this very place, and he wonders, with vague uneasiness, whether she would have approved of the step he is about to take.

Then he remembers how once, when he asked her advice about something, she had

answered with the sweet, radiant smile he loved.

“Follow the dictates of your own true heart, Oscar, and you cannot fail to please me.”

The gloom clears from his mind at this memory, and his decision is made.

“Florence,” he says, seating himself suddenly beside her, “tell me, did you refuse Signor Morelli because your love is still given to Mr. Hartington?”

“No, no, a thousand times no,” she replies, emphatically.

“If not then, to whom?” is the next demand, and, trembling beneath his fixed gaze, she falters, incoherently :

“I cannot tell.”

“Will you let me teach you to love *me*? Will you come and share my home, and be the guardian angel of my life? Answer me, Florence, dearest; promise to be my wife.”

One mute, trusting glance from her tender, blue eyes is all Mr. Berrel receives, yet it is

enough. With a fond, protecting gesture he draws the fair head down upon his shoulder, and feels that with this clinging, affectionate girl to comfort him, he need never again be despairing or miserable.

Thus his sorrow is assuaged.



CHAPTER XVI.

FAITHFUL STILL.

Ev'n when her light forsook him, it bequeathed
Ennobling sorrow; and her memory breathed
A sweetness that survived her living days,
As odorous scents outlasts the censor's blaze.

HE news of Mr. Berrel's engagement to Florence fills Turner Liston with blank dismay.

As is often the case with quiet, undemonstrative men, the absorbing passion of his life still fills every crevice of his heart, years have been powerless to take from its intensity, and, until now, he imagines Mr. Berrel as unlikely to marry as himself.

“Do you love Florence as you loved *her*?” is his wistful question that evening, as they sit together in the balcony smoking their postprandial cigars.

Looking dreamily down at the swiftly flowing waters beneath them, Mr. Berrel answers :

“ I love your sister as a man should love the woman he makes his wife, but not as Viola was loved. Florence knows this ; I have told her all, and she is content.”

“ And soon you will learn to forget,” puts in Turner, with bitter pain.

“ Forget her—Viola, whom from earliest childhood was my saint, my idol, my very religion ! Aye, when life itself fades away, not before ; and yet, I sometimes think, it will be then, when my eyes, too, are closed in death, that I shall fully realize what the world has been without her ; for then, thanks be to God who has shown me this, I may meet her again.”

Mr. Berrel pauses, his voice shaken with emotion. At last his troubled soul has found an anchor. The gloom and misty doubts which for long blinded his mental vision, and obscured the light of truth, have lifted, and he sees behind the clouds

the sun of hope rising in undreamt of beauty.

Turner guesses that this change has taken place, and clasps his hand in silent sympathy, then observes, hesitatingly :

“ You are quite sure you did not propose to Florence out of kindness, suspecting she liked you.”

“ My dear fellow, what an idea ! ” ejaculates Mr. Berrel in astonishment ; then, meeting his friend’s puzzled gaze, he adds :

“ You cannot understand my inconsistent character, is that it ? ”

“ Shall I explain it to him ? ” asks a soft voice behind, and, starting round, they find Florence regarding them with a tender smile.

Both are relieved when she continues :

“ I only heard Oscar’s last remark, but I think I know what you were talking about. Turner is surprised that you should choose a poor insignificant little thing like me, when you have long admired and loved a totally different style of woman. You want

to make him understand that your love for me is of an equally different stamp. It can never jar with that other love, because it is based upon such an immeasurably lower foundation, namely, me."

No mock humility is in the girl's tone ; she speaks with an air of perfect conviction, having always had a very humble opinion of herself, and, as he looks into the sweet, earnest face, Mr. Berrel feels that he might search the wide world through and not discover a fairer prize than gentle, unassuming Florence Liston.

Turner, too, is touched.

"Whatever you lack, child, you have the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit," he remarks, laying a caressing hand upon her head ere he steps into the drawing-room, and leaves the lovers together.

From that hour he is reconciled to their engagement.

Poor Sivana, in the meantime, is suffering agonies.

Being of a fiercely jealous disposition,

she has, from the first, resented Florence's influence over Oscar, and done her best to counteract it.

Now she is in despair.

"Mees Liston will take the little Signor to herself. I will see him no never, and there you stand making your mouth to laugh at me," she cries, with passionate incoherency, as Thomas, who has told her of the engagement, smiles at the excitement she displays.

In this tempest of mingled misery and indignation, Sivana looks handsome enough to account for Thomas's expression as he watches her. The hot, Italian blood in her veins seems at boiling point, to judge by the flashes of fire darting from her dark eyes, yet he does not quail, even beneath the torrent of words she flings at him.

Suddenly, as it began, the storm ends, though in a way he is utterly unprepared for.

Without the least warning she bursts into a flood of tears.

In helpless perplexity Thomas stares at her until the wild sobs subside, and, irritated at her own weakness, she glances up, remarking, brokenly, but with spirit :

“ You laugh while I cry, because you English have no heart; you care not for what hurts others. Mees Liston will take you to live with her, so it is nothing to you that my Signor marries her. You mind, no nothing, that I am left without a home.”

“ It is you, now, Sivana, that has got ‘a mind suspicious,’ ” answers Thomas, quoting her own quaint expression, a twinkle of amusement in his eye as he remembers the strange quaker-English she talked in those long-past days. “ I should not think of going to live with Mr. Berrel unless it were to please you.”

“ Me,” she repeats, sharp inquiry in her voice.

“ Yes,” he replies, with sudden deep earnestness of manner. “ Where you go I go ; if you want to stay on at Mr. Berrel’s, then I must be there too ; but could you

not get to like me as well as Master Oscar ? well enough to take me in hand instead of him when Miss Liston marries. I have saved money ; we could live in England, or still remain in Venice ; only, let me be, not your fellow servant, but your husband."

He pauses after this unusually rapid speech, then gives an impatient movement, as through the open window comes the sound of voices, and he knows they are about to be interrupted.

" What is your answer ? " he asks, urgently, as Sivana sits with her head on one side, gravely contemplating him, and does not seem in a hurry to reply.

" Ah, it is to me strange," she at length ejaculates, slowly, adding, more briskly, " but it must just be yes ; you will be a good husband, and I will see that you do not get dull and stupid and English."

" Why, I *am* English," remonstrates Thomas, with a smile, his whole face brightening at her words.

“Yes, you are the best of them,” she responds, condescendingly, and is rewarded in a manner which considerably amuses Florence, who, at this inopportune moment, enters the room.

With mingled pride and embarrassment, Thomas proceeds to explain matters, and his news is received with such evident pleasure and satisfaction, that Sivana becomes almost reconciled to Mr. Berrel’s fair *fiancée*.

“The very best thing that could have happened,” says Turner, emphatically, upon being told what has occurred, and his friend laughingly observes :

“I declare, it will be a second case of Florence and myself—the one will act as a restraining influence upon the other. We fiery-spirited Italians require some check, I can tell you, and Sivana is no mild specimen of our race, neither am I,” he concludes, bending over Florence to whisper, tenderly, “Are you not afraid to trust yourself to so bad tempered a fellow as I am? Surely you

have seen how savage I can be, have you not, little one?"

"Indeed I have; and once upon a time I was *very* frightened of you, but I am wiser now; I understand you," she answers, with calm content, looking into his dark eyes, fearless love shining from her own.

"My child, you have made a better man of me, you have taught me where to find comfort and peace, and, God helping me, no act of mine shall ever cause a cloud to rest upon the young life, you are giving to my keeping. As far as it is in mortal power to do so, you shall be guarded from all harm, shielded from all trouble, and, in a bright future, may you learn to forget the pain you suffered in the past."

"I have already done so," is her soft reply to this passionate appeal. "Your goodness has smoothed away every bitter pang. Now I know that perfect love does indeed cast out fear."

A tight hand-clasp and eloquent glance is his sole response; yet Florence is more

than satisfied, for she reads aright the expression resting upon his face, and feels assured that "come weal, come woe," the man she thus trusts will prove worthy of fullest confidence, completest love.



CHAPTER XVII.

CONCLUSION.

Peace to her troubled life has come,
Her heart has found a home.

A MONTH later Florence and Mr. Berrel are quietly married at Venice. To their considerable surprise, Mrs. Stourton graces the ceremony with her presence, though she takes care to impress upon each of the party the utter imprudence of such a marriage, and her total disapproval of the same.

“ My dear Turner, the result will be poverty—simple poverty,” she asserts to her incredulous son. “ An artist without private means is a beggar, nothing more ; he depends on the public, and any moment may find himself without a penny. Florence

has no fortune worth mentioning, therefore I ask you what are they to live on?"

"Their wits, I suppose," retorts Turner, too impatient to be polite. "I wish you would not trouble about them. Mr. Berrel knows what he is doing, and Florence is perfectly satisfied."

"Of course she is, and would be if they were stepping into an almshouse; it was *your* place to prevent all this, and instead, you jest about it, seeming to forget how brilliantly she might have married. There was Mr. Goldsworth, Mr. Hartington—by the way, what is Mr. Berrel going to do with that child?" she demands, interrupting herself to ask this question in quick, alert tones.

"Keep him until he is old enough to go to college," answers Turner, shortly, relieved to observe Florence advancing to his rescue.

Immediately Mrs. Stourton interrogates her daughter upon the subject, and with amazed indignation listens to her response.

“Yes, mamma, it is quite true, little Oscar is to live with us till then, and the dear boy seems delighted with his new aunt.”

“Send Mr. Berrel to me,” is Mrs. Stourton’s solemn command when sufficiently recovered to speak. “This must be seen to.”

Accordingly that gentleman is thoroughly lectured upon the responsibilities of matrimony, and the wickedness of entering that holy estate without duly counting the cost, as represented by pounds, shillings and pence, or banishing all needless expense from his house, such as his small nephew.

Mr. Berrel looked first puzzled, then amused, finally displeased. He allows Mrs. Stourton to exhaust her breath, if not her flow of ideas, then observes, sternly :

“I should not have proposed to your daughter had I not enough to keep her in comfort, though perhaps not in luxury. As for the other matter you mention, that can be no possible concern of yours. It lies

between Florence and myself; if *she* is content, no one else has either the right or the power to complain, and remember, Mrs. Stourton, I will not allow a third person to interfere in the smallest degree between my wife and I; we will settle our own affairs, and trouble none with the details."

The hint conveyed in these last words is not lost upon Mrs. Stourton, who finds out, to her astonishment, that Mr. Berrel possesses a will determined and immovable, and that his cold, proud wrath is far from a pleasant thing to face.

"Of course you are quite right," she asserts, with hastily assumed blandness, then adroitly changes the subject, and, with a feeling of intense relief, Florence realises that her husband is more than a match for her mother, and that never more will she be subjected to stinging speeches or undeserved taunts.

"You have chosen wisely, Florence," is what her step-father says, as he bids them farewell, and smiling brightly into his face,

she answers, “yes,” with no faintest doubt to mar the perfect confidence ringing through her voice.

“I think *she* would have wished it,” is what the gentle girl whispers in her brother’s ear, ere they part, and, watching how lovingly Viola’s child clings to her, how passionately he mourns their brief separation, Turner is convinced of the truth of this assertion, and is content.

And thus the tangled skein of Florence’s life is unravelled ; the web of deceit that once threatened to ensnare her innocent footsteps is broken through, and she is freed from influences hurtful to both mind and heart.

Triumphantly she has conquered over evil; her weapons, purity and truth; and now she reaps a golden harvest, matured and ripened by the pain and suffering, the anguish and despair, the tears and misery, endured in past years, when the burden laid upon her seemed so heavy, and the prospect of her ever escaping it so light.

Yes,

“Strength is born
In the deep silence of long-suffering hearts,
Not amidst joy,”

and the woman who goes forth as Oscar Berrel's bride has learnt the lesson sorrow alone can teach, and, by its aid, has become sweeter, nobler, more self-reliant, than the girl who gave the first warm love of her heart to Gerard Hartington, and, all unconsciously, aided in the cruel tragedy which ended Viola's bright, young life.

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